

VARIATIONS ON A THEME STATED BY THE KNIGHT,
THE ARTISTIC STRUCTURE OF THE FIRST
FRAGMENT OF THE CANTERBURY TALES

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ABSTRACT

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The first fragment of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales is not simply a random collection of tales. Rather, it consists of a number of tales which are all built upon a common core of plot elements. The fragment is ordered by a pattern of descent through the tales which is superimposed on a complex pattern of similarity among them. The fragment begins with the Knight's vision of a philosophically ordered world, but the later tales use materials drawn from the Knight's Tale to create their own visions of worlds of disorder. The fragment breaks off when the nobility and love of the Knight's world have been distorted into criminality and prostitution. In forming out of its very different tales a single structure, the first fragment may represent a greater artistic achievement than any or all of the tales of which it consists.

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INTRODUCTION

The four tales of the first fragment of the Canterbury Tales are not simply a collection of unrelated narratives. Rather, they form a tightly constructed artistic whole bound together by complex inter-tale patterning. The artistic structure of this fragment, though it has been discussed in general terms, has never been studied in detail. I now propose to undertake such a study.

While several types of inter-tale patterning are discernible in the first fragment, the most significant type is the use of a large number of similar plot elements in each of the tales. Each of them contains a similar core group of characters, in similar relationships to one another, who engage in various activities which parallel activities in the other tales. My first endeavour in this essay will be to analyse, as fully as possible the core group of plot elements which are common to all the tales of this fragment and form the basis of its unity. I will proceed to discuss those elements which are shared by particular pairs of tales, and which, though not common to the whole fragment, nevertheless contribute to its cohesiveness. I will briefly analyse each tale within its context to attempt to determine the manner in which it utilizes the common material of the fragment to create a distinct and individual

effect. Finally, I will examine the other major type of patterning evident in the fragment, the ordering of the tales to form definite progressions in terms of length, style, social rank of characters, and level of action.

I will restrict myself to the first fragment, not because I believe that the approach I will take has value only for this group of tales, but rather, because neither the scope of an essay such as this one, nor the limits of my scholarship would permit me to deal with any larger group of tales. The first fragment forms a convenient section of the Canterbury Tales with which to undertake the type of analysis I have proposed. It is short enough to permit detailed study, yet long enough to permit the patterns of plot structure which link the tales to be observable. While I am forced to restrict myself to the first fragment, I hope that the results of my study will offer some insight into the nature of Chaucer's artistry and will suggest the value of a similar analysis of other sections of the Canterbury Tales, or indeed of the whole work.

CHAPTER I

PATTERNS OF TALE SIMILARITY IN THE FIRST FRAGMENT

Elements of Similarity Which Extend Beyond the First Fragment

I hope to demonstrate that the first fragment of the Canterbury Tales is governed by a pattern of similarity among the tales comprising it. To do so it is necessary not only to indicate that similarities between the tales exist but that these similarities go beyond those that might normally be expected to occur. Certain of the parallels between the tales seem to follow fairly directly from their literary form and their place in the Canterbury Tales, and these may form a standard against which the significance of other patterns of similarity may be weighed.

The tales of this fragment share a common literary form; each of them is a "Canterbury tale". In his study, "What is a Canterbury Tale?", William Frost suggests: "A Canterbury tale, then, is a narrative of a certain length (somewhere between three pages and thirty, perhaps)." It is "told by a pilgrim on the way to Canterbury."¹ According to the frame story of the Canterbury Tales, each tale

¹Western Humanities Review 27 (1973): 54.

is presented orally to the other members of a group of pilgrims travelling together, who have agreed to participate in a contest of tale-telling organized by Harry Bailly.

The pilgrimage setting of the larger work does not seem to have very much effect on the content of the tales of the first fragment. All four narrators are laymen, and none of them tells a specifically Christian tale. The Knight's Tale, though serious and philosophical, has a pagan setting and makes no direct reference to Christian doctrine. The other tales, though set in Christian times, are bawdy and contain only the offices and trappings of Christianity while ignoring or flaunting its basic doctrines. The Knight's Tale includes two passing references to pilgrimages,² and while references such as these may follow from the pilgrimage situation, they remain of only minor importance and do not represent any concerted effort to adapt the tale to a pilgrimage setting. In the Miller's Tale, various characters swear oaths "by saint Thomas of Kent" (3291, see also 3425 and 3461), however these references to the saint, whose shrine is the object of the pilgrimage, are of little

²The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), Fragment I, 11, 2213-14, 2847-8. I will use this edition of Chaucer throughout this study. I will identify quotations from and references to the first fragment by line numbers alone. All references to later tales will include fragment and line numbers. References to other works by Chaucer will indicate the title of the work and the location within that work.

importance to the overall shape of the tale.

The rules of the contest of tale-telling are of more importance to this fragment than the pilgrimage setting.

Harry Bailly, the inn-keeper, offers the pilgrims "a myrthe" (767) which will "maken yow disport, /As I seyde erst, and doon yow som confort" (775-76). When the pilgrims accept his governance, he outlines the rules of his contest:

That ech of yow, to shorte with oure weye,
In this viage shal telle tales tweye
To Caunterbury-ward, I mene it so,
And homward he shal tellen othere two,
Of adventures that whilom han bifalle.
And which of yow that bereth hym best of alle,
That is to seyn, that telleth in this caas
Tales of best sentence and moost solaas,
Shal have a soper at oure aller cost
Heere in this place, sittynge by this post,
Whan that we come agayn fro Caunterbury.
(791-801)

Harry Bailly's purposes in devising his contest are secular and essentially unrelated to the religious aspects of the pilgrimage. He joins the journey to Canterbury, not as a pilgrim, but rather as the governor of the contest. His ultimate destination is not Canterbury, but rather a return to the Tabard Inn. The overall purpose of the contest is to provide mirth and "to shorte with oure weye" (791) -- that is, to make the journey as pleasant as possible. This clearly secular contest would seem to interfere with the religious purpose of the pilgrimage for which an arduous journey would be preferable, if not actually essential. Indeed, the rules of the contest are sufficiently constricting that when the Parson wishes to instruct his fellow

pilgrims he must ask special permission to break those rules (see X, 30-60), and his sermon is not properly a tale. The tales of the first fragment, however, being pieces of fiction, and not sermons, easily fit within the rules of Harry Bailly's contest.

Harry Bailly has only one specific requirement of the tales to be told by the pilgrims. They must be composed: "Of adventures that whilom han bifalle" (795); that is, they must be, or at least must be presented as factual narratives of actual events. All four narrators of the first fragment comply with this condition, and in the process, three of them use the Host's term "whilom" in the opening line of their respective tales. The tales are put forward either as events of the recent past which the narrator is able to tell as if on his own authority, or as events of the more distant past which the narrator can tell on the authority of old accounts of the events. The first line of the Knight's Tale is: "Whilom, as olde stories tellen us" (859); similarly, the Miller begins: "Whilom ther was dwellynge at Oxenford" (3187); and the Cook: "A prentys whilom dwelled in oure citee" (4365). The Reeve does not use the term "whilom", but he begins his tale with a precise, and apparently accurate description of the location

of the mill,³ and then in the fourth line of his tale interjects: "And this is verray sooth that I yow telle" (3924).⁴

The Host's rules, besides requiring the appearance of factuality from all tales, state the criteria for determining the winner of the contest, who is to be the one who tells: "Tales of best sentence and moost solas" (798). The Miller, Reeve and Cook, though telling bawdy tales chiefly concerned with "solas", that is, amusement or entertainment, nevertheless add "sentence", that is, meaning or significance,⁵ to their tales in the form of bits of biblical or proverbial wisdom.⁶

³For a discussion of the mill's location, see the note to line 3921 in The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Walter W. Skeat, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894) 5, 116. For a more recent discussion of the same point, see Francis P. Magoun Jr., "Chaucer's Great Britain," Mediaeval Studies 16 (1954): 149.

⁴J. L. Lowes, in Geoffrey Chaucer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), pp. 167-72, discusses the openings of a number of the Canterbury Tales, noting the use of the term "whilom" in many of them though not connecting the term with Harry Bailly's rules.

⁵My definitions for "sentence" and "solas" are obtained from the glossary of Works, ed. Robinson, pp. 976, 978.

⁶Donald MacDonald has made a study of "Proverbs, Sententiae, and Exempla in Chaucer's "Comic Tales: The Function of Comic Misapplication," Speculum 41 (1966): 453-65. His conclusion is that "the most important function of monitory elements in the comic tales has its source in the possibility of their misapplication by individual characters" (p. 464). My concern at this point is not so much with the "sententiae" themselves, but rather with their relation to the contest rules..

Men sholde wedden after hire estaat,
For youthe and elde is often at debaat.
(Miller's Tale, 3229-30)

And therefore this proverb is seyde ful sooth,
"Hym thar nat were we that yvele dooth";
A gylour shal hymself bigyled be.
(Reeve's Tale, 4319-21)

Wel seyde Salomon in his langage,
'Ne bryng nat every man into thyn hous'.
(Cook's Prologue, 4330-31)

The Knight's modifications of the source of his tale, Giovanni Boccaccio's Teseida delle Nozze d'Emilia,⁷ can be seen, at least in part, as an attempt to comply with the Host's conditions. To provide "sentence" he adds Boethian discussions of philosophy to the tale, and to keep the tale from losing all "solas", he condenses the Italian epic to romance proportions.

The reward offered by the Host as a prize in the tale-telling contest, a suitably material "soper at oure aller cost" (799), may be reflected in the importance given to food in the tales. All the narrators demonstrate an awareness of the value of good food and drink, even at points where the mention of a meal is not necessary to the development of the plot.⁸ Part of the revenge of the young clerks

⁷ My discussion of the Teseida depends mainly on the translation by Bernadette Marie McCoy bearing the title, The Book of Theseus (New York: Medieval Text Association, 1974), and the summary and discussion of the Teseida by Robert A. Pratt in "The Knight's Tale" in Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), pp. 82-105.

in the Reeve's Tale is that Symkyn has "payed for the soper everideel/Of Aleyn and of John" (4315-16). Theseus' worthiness is illustrated by the feasts he holds for the two hundred knights gathered by Palamon and Arcite (see 2190-96). In the grove, even when he is preparing for mortal battle with Palamon, Arcite remains practical enough to offer his foe some food and bedding (1615-16). In the Miller's Tale, when Nicholas disappears into his room to set his plan into action, he remembers to take plenty of food with him (3409-11). John, the carpenter, in his preparations for the flood, is careful to provide "breed and chese, and good ale in a jubbe" (3628). The Cook's Tale, which is to be about a victualler, that is, a food merchant, would presumably also recognize the high value of good food.

Thus the tales of the first fragment appear to share certain characteristics which derive from the situation of the Canterbury pilgrimage and the rules of Harry Bailly's contest. Of course, these rules and the pilgrimage situation apply to all the tales of the Canterbury series, not only those of the first fragment. The later tales do in fact share many of the characteristics we have noted above. Although a number of the tales are devotional, only the Parson's Tale is purely instructional, and therefore not in keeping with the Host's purpose of entertainment. The others are all tales "Of aventures that whilom han bifalle" (795), and no fewer than seven narrators use the Host's

term "whilom" in introducing their tales.⁸ The tales all provide varying mixtures of "sentence" and "solas": the Wife of Bath includes in her tale a lengthy discourse on the nature of "gentillesse" (III, 1109-76), and after completing his amusing fable, the Nun's Priest advises his listeners to "Taketh the moralite" (VII, 3440) of the tale. The significance of food and drink appears in several tales, notably the Franklin's, in which the magician is prepared to accept the food that has been provided him as sufficient payment for his services: "Thou hast payed wel for my vitaille./ It is ynogh" (V, 1618-19).

The elements of similarity which I have been discussing to this point are common to at least a good number of the Canterbury Tales. Consequently they cannot indicate a great deal about the specific structures of the first fragment. Rather, these elements of similarity may form a standard against which the significance of other similarities among the tales of the first fragment may be evaluated. I hope to demonstrate that these other similarities are of sufficient scope and significance to form the basis of the unity of the first fragment.

Elements of Similarity Common
Only to the First Fragment

The most obvious correspondence among the tales of

⁸Other tales to use the term "whilom" are those of the Man of Law, II, 134; Friar, III, 1301; Clerk, IV, 64; Merchant, IV, 1245; Pardoner, VI, 463; Shipman, VII, 1; and Nun's Priest, VII, 2821.

the first fragment lies in their choice of main characters. Each of the three complete tales contains one older man, two young men, and one young woman.⁹ The Reeve adds to this core group a second woman and all the tales have additional minor figures. When it breaks off, the Cook's Tale has introduced four characters similar to the core group of the other tales, though due to the incomplete nature of the tale it is impossible to prove that this group of characters

⁹This fairly obvious point has received remarkably little critical attention. Frost, in "What is a Canterbury Tale?" noted: "In each of the three stories two youthful amorous rivals are brought into the orbit of a vividly individualized male member of the older generation" (p. 54), but does not follow the similarities any farther. Neither of the two major articles on the first fragment: Charles A. Owen Jr.'s "Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: Aesthetic Design in the Stories of the First Day," English Studies 35 (1954): 49-56, and William C. Stokoe Jr.'s "Structure and Intention in the First Fragment of The Canterbury Tales," University of Toronto Quarterly, 21 (1951-2): 120-27, pay any attention to the patterns of tale similarity common to the whole fragment. Rather, they both note patterns of similarity between the tales of the Knight and Miller, and certain similarities of theme between the tales of the Miller and Reeve. Stokoe's article is virtually an analysis of the Miller's Tale with some discussion of the Knight's Tale and only brief mention of the Reeve's. Owen sees the Miller's Tale as closely paralleling the Knight's, but he sees the Reeve's Tale as only an angry response to a perceived insult, and fails to recognize its essential similarity to the other two tales. "The parallelism and paradox of the Knight's Tale are reflected on two levels -- in the rivalry of Nicholas and Absolon for Alisoun within a tale and in the verbal combat of two pilgrims, the Miller and the Reeve" (p. 55). Owen sees the Reeve's Tale as being linked to the other two externally, by means of the Reeve's argument with the Miller, rather than internally, by means of the similarities among the tales that I hope to demonstrate do contribute significantly to the unity of the entire fragment. Most critics tend to follow the same general approach as Owen and Stokoe.

would not have been added to, or that all four characters would necessarily have been involved in the subsequent action. The core group of four characters used in the tales of the first fragment is not used by Chaucer elsewhere in the Canterbury Tales. Four tales, those of the Merchant, Franklin, Physician, and Shipman, use a core group of characters consisting of an older man, a young woman, and one young man; however, unlike the group of characters used in the first fragment, such a group does not allow rivalry among two characters of equal age and rank, which forms a significant part of all of the first three tales. Not only do none of the later Canterbury Tales utilize the group of characters used in the first fragment, nowhere else in the collection do any two consecutive tales use the same core group of characters as one another. The first fragment is the only group of consecutive tales to be linked to one another by their choice of main characters.

Furthermore, in these tales built around a similar group of characters, the relationships within the group, and the events which occur, are in many respects similar. In each tale the women are somehow related to the older man and are in his care. In all cases the older man is married, though in the Knight's Tale his wife remains outside the core group of characters. The young men are single and unrelated to either the older men or the women of their tales. In each tale the young men are roughly equal in rank

to one another, whereas the older man is or appears to be in a more powerful position. Palamon and Arcite are the vanquished heirs to a ransacked Thebes, whereas Theseus is the powerful lord who has conquered them. Nicholas is "a poure scoler" (3190) and Absolon only somewhat better off, whereas John, the carpenter, is "a riche gnof" (3188). Though Nicholas and Absolon are much more clearly differentiated than the other pairs of young men, they are both minor clerics, and so are of about the same social rank. In the Reeve's Tale, not only is Symkyn more affluent than John and Aleyn, who are "yonge povre scolers two" (4002), but he is also physically powerful and well armed. The similarity of the two young men in each tale is heightened by the fact that their goals are the same though their methods of attempting to achieve those goals may differ. In the Knight's Tale, both young men wish to marry Emelye; in the Miller's they both want to be granted Alisoun's favours; and in the Reeve's Tale they want revenge against Symkyn and some sort of sexual solace, though they do not seem to be particular as to its source.

The action of the tales takes place on the property of the older man, reinforcing his theoretically superior position. One or both of the young men are residing with the older one for the major part of the tale. At the beginning of the Knight's Tale, Palamon and Arcite are imprisoned by Theseus; after his release, Arcite returns in disguise to

become Theseus' servant; finally, both young men return to Athens as guests of honour for the tournament. Nicholas is a boarder in the house of John, the carpenter. In the Reeve's Tale the two young clerks come to Symkyn's mill as customers, but as a result of his trick are forced to stay the night. They agree to pay for their stay though in fact they never do. In his prologue, the Cook comments at some length on the dangers of bringing guests into one's home:

For herberwyng by nyghte is perilous.
Wel oghte a man avysed for to be
Whom that he broghte into his pryvetee.
(4332-34)

The Cook appears to find "herberwyng" one of the most important aspects of the tale he has just heard, and in a recent article, Gerhard Joseph used this "argument of herbergage" (4329) as the basis of an approach to the Canterbury Tales as a whole.¹⁰

While they are residing with the older man, the young men first come into contact with the women of their tales. Absolon, who is the only one of the young men never to reside with the older man, is also the only one to never have any success with his lady. Even Arcite, who dies before enjoying the fruits of his victory, at least succeeds in winning Emelye's affection (2680-83). The Miller even

¹⁰ "Chaucerian 'Game' -- 'Earnest' and the 'Argument of Herbergage' in The Canterbury Tales," Chaucer Review 5 1970: 183-96. Joseph's discussion of the first fragment concentrates on the changing conception of space in the tales.

suggests that Absolon's failure may be due to the fact that he is some distance away from Alisoun: "By cause that he fer was from hire sight, /This nye Nicholas stood in his light" (3395-96). In the Knight's Tale the young men's proximity to Emelye causes them to fall in love and affords them a certain pleasure in being able to see her. In the later tales, proximity provides the possibility of the actions by which the young men, with the exception of Absolon, gain their amorous objectives.

In all these tales the young men are intent on gaining their objectives and are prepared to use deception to do so. Arcite returns to Athens in disguise and with a false name. Nicholas convinces John that a second flood is coming, and Absolon pretends to want a second kiss in order to gain his revenge. John, the young clerk, moves the cradle to deceive Symkyn's wife. In cases in which young men do not use deception, their means of pursuing their objectives are not necessarily any more scrupulous. Palamon escapes from prison by drugging his jailer (1470-74), an action he later suggests is reprehensible: "I am thilke woful Palamoun/That hath thy prisoun broken wikkedly" (1734-35). Aleyn's approach to Malyne in the Reeve's Tale is too direct to be considered seduction, though it is not quite rape:

This wenche lay uprighte, and faste slepte,
Til he so ny was, er she myghte espie,
That it had been to late for to crie,
And shortly for to seyn, they were aton.
(4194-97)

As Robert Worth Frank Jr. notes: "A country girl is swived ('raped' is too strong and 'seduced' is too kind; Chaucer's word is best)."¹¹ Though Andreas Capellanus suggests that in loving peasants it may be necessary to "use a little compulsion as a convenient cure for their shyness,"¹² Aleyn's approach can hardly be considered entirely proper.

Various of the characters believe they can foresee or control the events of their tales, though in each case the events turn out contrary to their expectations. Theseus believes he can determine Emelye's husband by his tournament, but in fact she marries the loser of the tournament. Arcite believes wrongly that by winning the battle he will win Emelye. In the Miller's Tale, John is convinced that by hanging tubs from his roof he will become a lord of all the world, though he only succeeds in becoming a cuckold, and in breaking his arm. Absolon anticipates a kiss (3680-83), but does not anticipate its nature. Nicholas too receives something other than the kiss he expected. In the Reeve's Tale, the young clerks believe they can avoid being cheated by Symkyn, and later he believes that the trick by which he

¹¹"The Reeve's Tale and the Comedy of Limitation," in Directions in Literary Criticism, eds. Stanley Weintraub and Philip Young (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973), p. 59.

¹²The Art of Courtly Love, trans. John Jay Parry (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1959), p. 149.

cheats them constitutes a complete victory over them. Both Symkyn's wife and Aleyn believe they have found their respective beds when, in fact, they are both being deceived by John's trick with the cradle.

Each tale contains some degree of rivalry between the two young men which is related to their pursuit of amorous objectives. Palamon and Arcite, though sworn brothers, become mortal enemies from the moment they see Emelye. At first their conflict takes the form of verbal argument, later that of single combat in the grove, and finally that of a massive tournament. In the Reeve's Tale John, the clerk, lying in bed, worries that he "sal been halde a daf, a cokenay!" (4208), unless he can match or better his companion's success. Aleyn's first thought after leaving Malyne is to boast of his night's adventures and to taunt his comrade:

As I have thries in this, shorte nyght
Swyved the milleres doghter bolt upright,
Whil thow hast, as a coward, been agast.
(4265-67)

The fact that Aleyn chooses the wrong ear for his boast does not alter his intent. The rivalry between the young clerks of the Miller's Tale is implicit in their common pursuit of Alisoun. In the final scene at the window, Nicholas sets out to have a joke at the expense of Absolon, who revenges his wounded dignity on Nicholas' posterior.

The tales also contain another type of hostility between the two young men on the one hand, and the older man

on the other. In the Knight's Tale the hostility is the result of the war between Athens and Thebes in which Theseus conquered the young knights and took them back to Athens as prisoners. When he escapes from prison Palamon intends "his freendes for to preye/ On Theseus to helpe him to werreye" (1483-84), and later in his speech to Theseus in the grove he characterizes both Arcite and himself as: "thy mortal foo" (1724, 1736). For his part Theseus is ready to execute both of them immediately (see 1742-47) but is dissuaded by the weeping ladies. In the Miller's Tale the hostility is less marked with the young clerks regarding John, the carpenter, more as an obstacle in the way of their pursuit of Alisoun than as an enemy. However, Nicholas does express his disrespect for John: "A clerk hadde litherly biset his whyle, / But if he koude a carpenter bigyle" (3299-3300), and John voices his corresponding disrespect for clerks in his story of an astronomer who fell into a "marle-pit" (3460). In the Reeve's Tale, the strife between the young men and the older one motivates almost all the action of the tale from Symkyn's trick to cheat the clerks, to the beating they administer to him in the darkened bedroom (4308). Even the sexual exploits of the clerks would seem to be motivated more by a desire for revenge against Symkyn, than by any particular desire for the women with whom they become involved (see 4177-87, 4201-9).

The tales are not solely concerned with hostility or rivalry between men; they also depend on the attraction between men and women.¹³ This attraction takes different forms in different tales, varying from the elegant formality of courtly love in the Knight's Tale to more or less straight-forward lust in the 'charls' tales.¹⁴ Whatever the form used, each of the women of the tales is finally won by one of the young men, and both parties are satisfied by the arrangement. Palamon and Emelye are left "Lyvyng in blisse, in richesse, and in heele" (3102), with never a word

¹³Trevor Whittock, in A Reading of the Canterbury Tales (Cambridge at the University Press, 1968), p. 77, notes these two major themes of the fragment, but only with reference to the first two tales: "Central themes of The Knight's Tale have been love and war In The Miller's Tale we meet the same themes, apparently scaled down to lechery and strife." Unfortunately Whittock does not extend his analysis to the rest of the fragment.

¹⁴Edmund Reiss discusses the changing nature of love in the first fragment in "Chaucer's Parodies of Love," in Chaucer the Love Poet, eds. Jerome Mitchell and William Provost (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1973), pp. 27-44. D. W. Robertson Jr., in A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 469, perceives the common theme of love as linking the tales of the first fragment:

"There is no real difference between the love expressed by Palamon and Arcite on the one hand and that expressed by Nicholas and Absolon on the other. It is, in all these instances 'love for delight'. Chaucer has, as it were, played the same 'melodie' in two different keys in the two opening tales of his collection.

The song continues with still further variations in the Reeve's Tale." Neither Reiss nor Robertson go beyond the perception of a common theme within the fragment to discuss the common plot structures which link these tales.

of argument between them (3105). Nicholas and Alisoun's night of "bisynesse of myrthe and of solas" (3654) is all "revel" and "melodye" (3652). Symkyn's wife finds her experience with the clerk a pleasant change: "So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yooore" (4230), and Malyne is so moved by her night with Aleyn that she tells him the hiding place of the cake (4240-45). While attraction between men and women and hostility among men are important in all tales, their converses, hostility between men and women and friendship among men, are deliberately underplayed. The Knight's Tale takes place after the war against Femenye; "debaat" between John, the carpenter, and Alisoun is suggested (3230) but never depicted in the tale; even the blow Symkyn receives from his wife is struck in error. The sworn brotherhood of Palamon and Arcite is mentioned, but throughout the tale they act as deadly rivals; and the clerks of the Reeve's Tale seem only concerned with outdoing one another. Though the tales present the possibilities of friendship among men and hostility between men and women, these possibilities are pointedly left undeveloped.

The parallels between the three tales that I have been discussing to this point have dealt for the most part with broad plot concerns. While these parallels are certainly important, and lend support to an argument that tale similarity forms an important element in the structure of the first fragment, nevertheless, many of these similarities

are fairly predictable, given the initial choice of characters. For instance, given an attractive young woman in the tale, the question of love or sex can be expected to arise. Even in the Second Nun's Tale, a thoroughly pious saint's life, Valerian at first questions whether the angel his bride claims to see is in fact a supernatural being, or a mortal paramour (VII, 162-68). Similarly, given two young men, it is reasonable to expect some sort of rivalry between them, as in the Pardoner's Tale, in which two of the revellers turn against the third. However, of all the tales of the Canterbury series, only those of the first fragment link the rivalry of young men to the attractions of a young woman. Even if some of the similarities I have been discussing are fairly predictable, the weight and combination of them are significant.

As well as sharing a core group of characters and a number of general plot concerns, the tales of the first fragment have in common a number of quite specific plot elements. In each tale, on the basis of an agreement with one or both of the younger men, the older man undertakes to erect a building or arrange a building of his in a particular way. As he agreed in the grove, Theseus erects a majestic amphitheatre, and builds three temples in its walls. In accord with Nicholas' plan, John hangs three tubs from his roof. When the young clerks offer to pay him for a night's lodging, Symkyn makes a third bed in his room. The

arrangement of each building includes three separate but similar places in which one or more characters spend some time. The temples, tubs, and beds are all made or arranged by the older man at approximately the same point in each tale, between the preliminary and the main action, and all are the site of some sort of religious observance. In the Knight's Tale, the various characters go to their respective temples to submit formal prayers to their gods. From their tubs, Nicholas, John, and Alisoun offer a simple prayer: "'Now; Pater-noster, clom!' seyde Nicholay,/ And 'clom,' quod John and 'clom,' seyde Alisoun" (3638-39). In the Reeve's Tale, Aleyn, lying in bed with John, comments on the "complyn" (4171),¹⁵ or evening service, of snores coming from the other two beds.

The building arranged by the older man is the site of most of the later action of each tale including the resolution of the love affair or affairs and also some sort of battle in which one of the young men is injured. In the Knight's Tale, the various characters pray in the temples built into the lists, thereby bringing into the tale the gods who will ultimately resolve it. Also, the tournament takes place within the lists, and there Arcite receives both his victory and his fatal injury in accord with the dictates

¹⁵See Robert M. Corréale, "Chaucer's Parody of Compline in the Reeve's Tale," Chaucer Review 1 (1966-7): 161-66.

of the gods. Though Palamon is not to marry Emelye until some years after the tournament, the basic problem of the love triangle is resolved by Arcite's injury. In the Miller's Tale, John must be safely snoring in his kneading tub before the night's activities can begin below him, and later his fall to the floor brings the events to a close. In the meantime, Absolon has received the injury to his pride of the misplaced kiss, and Nicholas the physical injury of the branded "towte" (3853). In the Reeve's Tale, all the later action, from the initial bed-switching, to Symkyn's falling on his wife in the course of his struggle with Aleyn and rousing her to action, depends on the arrangement of three beds in one small room. In the fight which ends the tale, Aleyn has his "nose and mouth to broke" (4277), and Symkyn is well beaten:

A final feature common to the three tales is the pattern of the changing fortunes of the young men. In each of the tales the plot appears to have reached a logical conclusion as the more forward of the young men gains the success he has both wished for and expected and wins the affection of the young lady and some sort of tactical advantage in relation to his rival. However, a surprise turn of the plot extends the tale beyond this apparent conclusion and the young man loses the advantage he has held over his rival and receives an injury that is related to his pride at his original triumph. The second young man recovers from

his initial loss of face and gains some type of satisfaction different from that which his rival has enjoyed. The action of the Knight's Tale appears to have reached a conclusion when Arcite wins the tournament as Mars had predicted for him, and with it wins also the affection of Emelye (2680-83). However, the plot takes a surprise turn, and Arcite suffers a fatal accident immediately after his victory. Though the accident is the work of Saturn, it strikes Arcite in his moment of pride, when he has removed the helmet that would have protected him in the event of a fall and is no longer looking where he is riding:

This fierse Arcite hath of his helm ydon,
And on a courser, for to shewe his face,
He priketh endelong the large place
Lokyng upward upon this Emelye;

(2676-79)

Douglas Brooks and Alastair Fowler may overstate the case in suggesting that Arcite "loses his life after the tournament while parading his victory, enacting what would have been recognized by the Knight's audience as an emblem of superbia;"¹⁶ however, pride is clearly an element in Arcite's fall. Palamon recovers from the shame of his defeat and his grief at Arcite's death, and after a period of several years, marries Emelye and has the satisfaction of living with her in bliss for the rest of his life. In the Miller's Tale, after the incident of the misplaced kiss,

¹⁶"The Meaning of the Knight's Tale," Medium Aevum 39 (1970): 137.

the plot has reached a possible conclusion with Nicholas having succeeded in his plan to dupe John, and Alisoun having obtained Absolon's kiss. However, Absolon comes on the plan of the branding and adds a new twist to the plot. Nicholas suffers his painful injury as a result of believing that he can add one more triumph to an enjoyable night and "amend al the jape" (3799) at Absolon's expense. Absolon, in turn, gains his own type of satisfaction, though in this tale the satisfaction is revenge, not sexual solace as in the other two tales. In the Reeve's Tale, John seems destined to be the butt of the joke as he lies alone in bed while his comrade is enjoying himself with Symkyn's daughter. However, his trick with the cradle results in a surprise turn of the plot and offers John satisfaction to balance that of his rival. Later, Aleyn, also deceived by the cradle, and bursting with pride over his escapades, boasts to Symkyn (whom he believes to be John): "I have thries in this shorte nyght/ Swyved the milleres doghter bolt upright" (4265-66). Aleyn's boast leads to his fight with Symkyn, and though Symkyn is ultimately vanquished by his wife, and beaten by the clerks, initially it is Aleyn who has the worst of it, and has his "nose and mouth to broke" (4277).

The tales of the first fragment, then, appear to be linked to one another by very extensive use of common elements. All tales, including that of the Cook, have a

similar core group of characters. The Cook's Tale breaks off after introducing its characters, but there seems to be no reason why its action could not have followed a pattern similar to that of the other tales. The three complete tales are built around a common core of plot elements which may be summarized as follows: two young men compete in the amorous pursuit of one or two women who are in the care of an older man who is also host to one or both of the young men; the older man, on the basis of an agreement with his guest or guests, undertakes the special arrangement of a building which sets the scene for later action which is preceded by a religious observance of some sort; the more forward of the young men succeeds in his plans and wins the affection of the young lady; the second young man recovers from apparent failure to gain some different type of success from that of his rival. In each tale, numerous other elements are added to the common core, to produce three very different tales. Nevertheless, the common core of plot elements is sufficiently large and important to establish the proposition that tale similarity forms a striking and significant element in the structure of this fragment.

CHAPTER II

ELEMENTS COMMON TO VARIOUS PAIRS OF TALES, THOUGH NOT THE WHOLE FRAGMENT

The core of basic elements common to all the tales of the first fragment is clearly of considerable importance. However, it by no means includes all the important similarities and parallels occurring in this fragment. Between each pair of tales drawn from the fragment there are numerous parallels which do not form part of the overall common plot structure. These similarities are particularly interesting in that they not only contribute to the unity of the fragment by strengthening the links between tales, but they also distinguish between two tales which share a given characteristic and a third which does not. Consequently, a close analysis of these similarities may offer insight into the process by which tales using similar elements are differentiated from one another by Chaucer.

I will begin with a discussion of the characteristics common to both the Knight's and Miller's tales, then proceed to a similar discussion of the Miller's and Reeve's tales, and finally the Knight's and Reeve's. In each case I will attempt to analyse the nature of the links between the pair of tales in question and also their function in the overall

design of the fragment.

The Knight's Tale and the Miller's Tale

The tales of the Knight and Miller form the first pair of tales in the Canterbury series and so offer the first opportunity for tale comparison. The Miller's Prologue alerts the reader to the possibility of some sort of significant similarity between the two tales. The Host requests: "Somwhat to quite with the Knyghtes tale" (3119), and the Miller offers: "a noble tale for the nones, /With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale" (3126-7). If one tale is to requite or repay another the two must somehow be comparable or of equivalent value. When the idea of "quiting" has been raised twice in a few lines, the reader is forced to consider the two tales as a related pair and not simply as two independent narratives and must attempt to determine the ways in which they may be comparable or equivalent. The Miller refers to his offering as "a noble tale" (3126), echoing the description of the Knight's Tale as "a noble storie" (3111) just a few lines earlier, and suggesting that the two tales are of equal rank or value.

For some time critics have recognized that some type of similarity exists between the Knight's and Miller's tales. In his influential article "An Interpretation of Chaucer's Knight's Tale", William Frost noted that the Miller's Tale "represents an artistic antithesis to the Knight's Tale, being also a tale of the rivalry of two

suitors for a young woman."¹⁷ More than twenty-five years later, Paul G. Ruggiers offered a view of the similarity of these two tales that had not progressed much from Frost's suggestion: "The wooing of a young woman by two young men, seen from widely divergent points of view to be sure, is the situation common to both."¹⁸ Most other critics who have commented on similarities between these two tales have taken an approach not unlike that of Frost and Ruggiers,¹⁹ noting the love triangle in each tale, or else noting a general similarity of theme,²⁰ but not going very much beyond that. We have seen above that the use of a similar group of characters links all the tales of the first fragment, not only those of the Knight and Miller. If at this point we wish to

¹⁷ Review of English Studies 25 (1949): 303.

¹⁸ The Art of the Canterbury Tales (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 55.

¹⁹ Other critics to have used a similar approach would include Stokoe, in "Structure and Intention", and Owen, in "Aesthetic Design" as noted above. In addition, Helen Strom Corsa, in Chaucer: Poet of Mirth and Morality (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), p. 110, notes: "There are four important characters in The Miller's Tale, as there had been in the Knight's, and, in exact ways, each is clearly the opposite."

²⁰ Whittock, in Reading (p. 77) suggests: "The Miller's Tale picks up several themes from The Knight's Tale, and, by embodying them in a different realm of discourse, fills out their implications." Ian Robinson, in Chaucer and the English Tradition (Cambridge at the University Press, 1972), p. 98, notes: "The Miller's Tale pays out The Knight's Tale by debunking its notions of love."

discuss significant similarities between these two tales it will be necessary to move beyond those similarities which are among the basic plot structures common to the whole fragment.

The tales of the Knight and Miller both use a core group of four characters, and are in this respect distinct from the Reeve's Tale which adds a second woman to the core group. The smaller core group used in the first two tales has a number of consequences. As the group includes only one woman and two young men, the young men's amorous intentions must come into conflict. Whereas the Reeve offers both his young men some kind of sexual solace, the Knight and Miller have only one young man satisfied in love, and in both tales the other young man must content himself with a physical triumph over his rival. The Knight's Tale has Arcite, the more forward of the young men, triumph in the battle-field, and has Palamon ultimately win Emelye. The Miller's Tale inverts the pattern, and Nicholas, the more forward of the young men, gains his night of love with Alisoun, whereas Absolon can only gain satisfaction in managing to brand his rival. In the Reeve's Tale there is no physical confrontation between the young men, and their rivalry is expressed in their efforts to outdo one another in sexual escapades, rather than in fighting one another over a particular woman.

The first two tales both have the more forward of the

young men residing within the household of the older man whereas the other is some distance away. Arcite, on his return to Athens, is first "page of the chambre of Emelye" (1427), and later a squire of Theseus' chamber (1439-40). Meanwhile Palamon remains locked in prison. In the Miller's Tale, Nicholas is John's boarder, whereas Absolon lives elsewhere, though his residence is never specifically identified. In contrast, in the Reeve's Tale, the two young clerks share a bed in Symkyn's home, and are never separated until they seek out their differing sexual solaces.

It may be possible to see the differences between the characters of Nicholas and Absolon in the Miller's Tale as an exaggerated extension of the differences between Palamon and Arcite. Penn R. Szittyá suggests that each tale contains "an idealistic and a realistic lover."²¹ While it may not be advisable to read too much into the very slight distinction between Palamon and Arcite, certain links between Arcite and Nicholas, and Palamon and Absolon are discernible. Absolon's song to Alisoun: "Now, deere lady, if thy wille be, / I praye yow that ye wole rewe on me" (3361-2), echoes Palamon's prayer:

Venus, if it be thy wil
.....
Of oure lynage have som compassioun,
(1104, 1110)

²¹"The Green Yeoman as Loathly Lady: The Friar's Parody of the Wife of Bath's Tale," PMLA 70 (1975): 386.

Arcite and Nicholas are both more concerned with their own needs and perceive the same result should they fail to obtain their desire:

And but I have hir mercy and hir grace,
That I may seen hir atte leeste weye,
I nam but deed; ther nis namoore to seye.
(Arcite, 1120-22)

Ywis, but if ich have my wille,
For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille.
.....
Lemman, love me al atones,
Or I wol dyen, also God me save!
(Nicholas, 3277-81)

Nicholas and Arcite are more clearly linked by the repetition of the line: "Allone, withouten any compaignye" (2779, 3204), which describes both Arcite in his grave, and Nicholas in his room. While the characters of the Miller's Tale are certainly of a much different sort from those of the Knight's, some links between the respective lovers are discernible.

These tales both contain genuinely attractive female characters. Emelye and Alisoun exemplify different types of beauty, but each of them possesses an attractiveness which is suited to the events in which they are involved. The description of Emelye in floral terms (1035-39) matches her passive role in the tale as the uninvolved object of the young lovers' attentions. Alisoun's description in sensual and animal terms (3233-70) matches her more active role. In each tale the young woman's beauty infatuates both young men, causing some sort of conflict between them, and motivating most of the plot. In contrast, in the Reeve's Tale, neither

of the women is particularly attractive, and the action of the tale, including even the sexual escapades is motivated not by the young clerks' attraction to the women, but rather by their conflict with Symkyn, and their rivalry with one another.

One of the most important links between the tales of the Knight and Miller is not based on character at all; rather, it is based on the extensive use of astrology in both tales. Both contain astrological predictions concerning major events, and the astrological system used by Nicholas in the Miller's Tale is a deliberate and precise parody of that which governs events in the Knight's Tale.

A number of critics have commented on the function of astrology in the Knight's Tale. W. C. Curry's discussion of the question, though not the earliest, is possibly the most complete, and certainly the most influential. Curry establishes that among Chaucer's modifications of his source, the Teseida, is a clear expansion of the astrological qualities of the gods in the tale: "With meticulous care and with painstaking accuracy he has succeeded in transferring the motivating power in the narrative from the pagan gods, who are to him little more than poetic fancies, to the

planets of the same name."²² The gods of the Knight's Tale remain personalized figures, not simply mechanical forces, but they do clearly possess astrological characteristics and powers. Mars' temple includes "the barbour, and the bocher" (2025) who would be inappropriate in the temple of a god of war, but who would be ruled by the planet Mars. Saturn boasts of the power of his "cours", or planetary orbit (2454-55).²³ Astrology also governs the characteristics of the knights who come to the aid of the young rivals. "Lygurge, the champion of Palamon, and Emetreus, the champion of Arcite, are depicted as Saturnian and Martian figures respectively. Similarly Arcite's fatal illness would be identified by medieval medicine as a type governed by Saturn, the god who caused his fall."²⁴

The most technical aspect of medieval astrology to

²²Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences (New York: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 148. The use of astrology in the tale has long been recognized. Thomas Tyrwhitt commented upon it in The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer. To which are added, an essay upon his language and versification; an introductory discourse; and Notes. 5 Vols. (London: T. Payne and Son, 1775-78), 4: 226-27. For a more recent discussion of the whole question of astrology in Chaucer's works, see Chauncy Wood, Chaucer in the Country of the Stars (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

²³See the note on the lines in question in Works, ed. Robinson, p. 680.

²⁴See Curry, Mediaeval Sciences, pp. 131-37 for a discussion of Emetreus and Lygurge, and pp. 139-48 for a discussion of Arcite's illness.

have a major function within this tale is the system of planetary hours, according to which each day of the week was assigned to a particular planet, and within each day the hours were assigned to different planets according to a fixed rotation. Each planet was supposed to have increased power during its days and hours. In A Treatise on the Astrolabe,²⁵ Chaucer himself outlines the system of rotation of planetary hours. When Palamon, Arcite, and Emelye pray to their respective gods before the tournament, each of them makes his or her prayer during the hour assigned to his or her god. The tournament itself is governed by the system, with Mars giving victory to his knight, Arcite, during his day, Tuesday, and with Saturn causing the fatal accident during his hour of that day.²⁶

The role of astrology in the Miller's Tale is very different from the role which it plays in the Knight's Tale. Whereas in the Knight's Tale astrology is not discussed but subtly controls the action, in the Miller's Tale, astrology is openly discussed, one main character is an astrologer, and an astrological prediction sets the main events into action, but the actual events of the tale are not governed by astrological forces, but rather by wilful human action.

²⁵Works, ed. Robinson, pp. 544-63; see particularly Part II, 12, p. 553.

²⁶William Hand Brown, "Notes on Chaucer's Astrology," MLN 23 (1908): 53-54, commented on this point.

Nicholas is introduced as an astrologer of considerable skill (3192-98). Whereas Arcite died as a result of a medical condition governed by the astrological power of Saturn, Nicholas pretends to suffer from an astrological affliction: "Nicholas sat evere capyng upright, /As he had kiked on the newe moone" (3444-45). John, the carpenter, delivers a speech (3450-64) discussing the dangers and (literal) pitfalls of "astromye" (3451). However, shortly afterward he believes without hesitation the prediction which Nicholas claims: "I have yfounde in myn astrologye, /As I have looked in the moone bright" (3514-15). John J. O'Connor²⁷ has pointed out that, in predicting a second flood by means of astrology, Nicholas is in keeping with a tradition that Noah learned of the flood through astrology. The moon, from which Nicholas claims to have obtained his prophecy is an appropriate heavenly body to foretell a flood. In the Franklin's Tale, when Aurelius wishes the rocks of Brittany to disappear, his first thought is to pray for an astrological solution to his problem whereby the moon who ~~of~~ the see is chief goddesse and queene" (V, 1046, see also 1045-61), would cause a flood to cover the rocks.

Not only is the general subject of Nicholas' prediction astrologically appropriate, the details of the

²⁷"The Astrological Background of the Miller's Tale," Speculum 31 (1956): 220-25. Unfortunately O'Connor discusses only the tradition of Noah as an astrologer and not the broader question of the function of astrology in the tale.

prediction are carefully designed to be completely consistent with the system of planetary hours which governed the Knight's Tale.²⁸ Nicholas predicts to John:

"That now a Monday next, at quarter nyght,
Shal falle a reyn, and that so wilde and wood,
That half so greet was nevere. Noes flood.
This world," he seyde, "in lasse than an hour
Shal al be dreynt, so hidous is the shour.
Thus shal mankynde drenche, and lese hir lyf."
(3516-21)

The predicted rain is to occur on Monday, the day of the moon, at "quarter night," and to drown all mankind within one hour. This hour, according to Chaucer's system for calculating the planetary hours, is ruled by the planet Saturn, "the most powerful of the infortunes,"²⁹ the planet with the most harmful influence. In the Knight's Tale Saturn not only causes the death of Arcite, but specifically claims to govern the fate that Nicholas foretells for the world: "Myn is the drenchyng in the see so wan" (2456). Nicholas not only predicts the flood, he predicts its abatement as well. He tells John to provide food and drink for one day (3551-52), then adds: "The water shal aslake and goon away/Aboute pryme upon the nexte day" (3553-54). The "nexte day" to which he refers could not be Tuesday, since were the flood to abate on Tuesday morning, no provisions would be

²⁸See my Appendix "Nicholas' Astrology" for a discussion of the system of planetary hours outlined by Chaucer as it applies to this tale.

²⁹Curry, Mediaeval Sciences, p. 127.

necessary. Therefore, he must be referring to Wednesday. Prime of Wednesday would (again using Chaucer's system of calculation) be the beginning of a planetary hour governed by "Jupiter, the greatest of all the fortunate planets."³⁰ The entire course of the predicted flood is consistent with the system of planetary hours.

If the tales of the Knight and Miller are similar in both making extensive use of astrology, they differ in the relationship they suppose to exist between astrological forces and human characters, and the general attitude toward astrology that such relationships imply. In the Knight's Tale, astrology is the governing force of the tale, and the fates of human characters are controlled by the shifting balance of astrological forces. Astrology is treated seriously, and its power is evident throughout the tale. The predictions given to the characters are all strictly true, though Arcite is capable of misinterpreting both Mercury's promise: "Ther is thee shapen of thy wo an ende" (1392), and Mars' promise of victory. In contrast, in the Miller's Tale, the general attitude to astrology is a cynical one. Astrology is little more than a tool that can be used by the characters of the tale in pursuit of their own ends. The one prediction given in the tale is a false one used by one character to manipulate another. In the

³⁰ Ibid.

Knight's Tale, the events of the tournament occur according to the system of planetary hours. In contrast, in the Miller's Tale, though the false prediction is in accord with this system, the actual events of the tale appear to bear no relation to it. The characters climb into their separate tubs at nightfall, during the hour of Venus, goddess of love, and Nicholas and Alisoun climb back down and go off to the carpenter's bed during the hour of the Moon, or Diana, goddess of chastity.

Related to the function of astrology in each of these tales is the possibility of predicting the future. The characters of both tales wish to know the future, but the information they seek to obtain is of very different sorts. The concern of the characters of the Miller's Tale with knowing the future is a practical concern; people wish to know what will happen in order that they may be able to take full advantage of beneficial occurrences and minimize their losses in the event of adverse ones. Nicholas' ability to predict: "droghte or elles shoures" (3196) could be used by his customers to plan their agricultural activity. John, the carpenter, sets up his tubs both to save himself and his wife from the predicted flood and to establish himself as a lord over the earth after the flood waters recede. Nicholas' prediction offers John not simply a presumed glimpse of the future, but also a chance to turn his presumed knowledge to his own advantage. Even Absolon's ill-fated efforts to

foresee the future by non-astrological means are not without their practical side:

My mouth hath icched al this longe day;
That is a signe of kissing atte leeste.
Al nyght me mette eek I was at a feeste.
Therefore I wol go slepe an houre or tweye,
And al the nyght thanne wol I wake and pleye.
(3002-86)

In contrast, the predictions of the Knight's Tale offer the characters who receive them only information about the future, and no possibility to change that future by individual action. Though Emelye says: "I/Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf" (2304-5), when she is told she will be wed, there is never any question of her attempting or considering any action to avoid that fate. Similarly the two young knights are simply told that their respective prayers will come true, without any indication from their oracles that their success would depend in any material way on their own actions. The Knight's Tale presents a world in which astrological forces govern events without significant influence by human action. In contrast the Miller's Tale presents one in which characters are able to turn astrological events into tools to be manipulated in the pursuit of personal advantage.

The parallels between the tales of the Knight and Miller, and in particular the use of astrology in differing ways in the two tales, not only link the two of them together, but also help to establish the Miller's Tale as a

deliberate parody of the Knight's. The Miller uses elements from the Knight's Tale, but takes a radically different approach toward them. The result is not that Chaucer aligns himself with the vision of either the Knight or the Miller, neither of which can be complete visions as long as the opposing vision exists. Rather, the result is that, in a literary sense, the Miller's Tale becomes an effective and appropriate "quitting" of the Knight's.

The Miller's Tale and the Reeve's Tale

The tales of the Miller and Reeve have in common a great number of characteristics which set these two tales apart from the Knight's Tale which precedes them. Both of these tales may be described as being short, coarse, comic tales in which young clerks outwit older commoners and seduce the women in his care. Even such a brief description makes clear that these tales are totally different from the courtly romance of the Knight. Whereas the similarities which link the Knight's Tale to those of the Miller and Reeve are similarities of detail, those which link the Miller's Tale to the Reeve's tend rather to be similarities of broader genre characteristics which relate to the coarse humour common to them, though there are also some quite specific links between the two tales.

The genre of the "cherles tale" (3169)

In the Miller's Prologue, Chaucer offers a formal

apology for the Miller's and Reeve's tales and also for others of a similar nature (3167-86). The apology can not be entirely serious, as Chaucer asks to be excused from blame for repeating these tales on the grounds that he is obliged to record "the tales of all the pilgrims, whereas, in fact, both pilgrims and tales are his creations. Even if the apology as a whole can not be taken at face value, it does contain within it the suggestion that a number of tales within the Canterbury Tales belong to a type, or genre for which we may use Chaucer's own term, the "cherles tale" (3169).

Chaucer begins by commenting that the Miller "tolde his cherles tale in his manere" (3169), then proceeds with his apology, and concludes:

The Millere is a cherl, ye knowe wel this;
So was the Reve eek and othere mo,
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.
Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame;
And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game.
(3182-86)

A "cherles tale" (3169), then, is to be a "game", that is, a joke, jest, or amusement, of "harlôtrie", that is, "low or evil conduct; wickedness; ribaldry."³¹ This type of tale is to be told in a particular style: the Miller spoke: "in his manere" (3169). Before beginning to "quite" the Miller in his tale, the Reeve warns: "Right in his cherles

³¹The modern English equivalents of these terms are taken from the glossary of Works, ed. Robinson: "game," p. 952; "harlotie", or "harlotrye", p. 954.

termes wol I speke" (3917). As well as suggesting some of the characteristics of a churl's tale, Chaucer distinguishes it from other types of tale to be included in his collection. After apologizing for the Miller's Tale Chaucer continues:

And therfore, whoso list it nat yheere,
Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.

(3176-80)

The churl's tale, then belongs to a type of literature that serves no overt didactic purpose. In a recent article, Glending Olson established "the existence in the Middle Ages, particularly in its later centuries, of a coherent attitude towards literature for pleasure which ... is at least influential enough to provide a legitimate justification for certain works of art which do not seek to profit one's soul."³² Of course, Chaucer's churls' tales may take on a moral significance by virtue of their place within the Canterbury pilgrimage, even though they have no overt moral character. However, Chaucer, in his Retractions, does refer to "the tales of Canterbury, thilke that sownen into synne" (X, 1086), and if he does not mean to include the churls' tales it is difficult to imagine to which he could be referring.

Only a few characteristics of the churl's tale are

³²"The Medieval Theory of Literature for Refreshment and its Use in the Fabliau Tradition," Studies in Philology 71 (1974): 313.

suggested by Chaucer in the Miller's Prologue; to discover more of the characteristics of the genre, it will be necessary to examine the tales themselves. As is characteristic with Chaucer, the category is not entirely rigid; certain tales are clearly churls' tales, others clearly not, and some more difficult to classify. Clearly the tales of the Miller, Reeve, and Cook belong to the genre, being tales of "harlotrie" told by churls. Among the later tales, the Shipman's would certainly belong, as would that of the Summoner, who was introduced as "a gentil harlot" (General Prologue, 647), and the Canon's Yeoman. The Friar and Merchant should not be churls, but are proved churlish by their tales of "harlotrie". The prologues of the Wife of Bath, Pardoner, and Manciple deal with "harlotrie" of various sorts, but their tales are too restrained to be truly churls' tales.

The group of tales we must consider in attempting to discern the characteristics of this genre is quite large and varied, but certain similarities among these tales are quite clear. Ruggiers suggests: "the realistic tales ... are indeed, all of them, built upon the triad of trickery, deception, and surprise."³³ All of them, with the exception of the Merchant's Tale, concern clerks involved in improper behavior in the pursuit of either personal gain, or sexual

³³Art. p. 143.

satisfaction. The Merchant also narrates sexual escapades, but the characters involved are knights and squires, rather than clerks and commoners as in the other tales. Without exception the churls' tales offer a cynical view of the world and its inhabitants, according to which men are ruthless and self-seeking, and women are available sexual objects. In this world all institutions are corrupt, and only one value remains absolute, that of cleverness. Aldo Scaglione speaks of "the triumph of intelligence in the form of cunning in the vast fabliau literature," and of intelligence "having the power, therefore the right to prevail against any other value, as a natural force inevitably destined to triumph beyond good and evil."³⁴ Referring directly to Chaucer, Paul N. Siegel discusses "the world of comedy, where not the transgressions of moral law, but the violations of good sense are punished."³⁵ Within the tales the various characters strive to trick, or deceive one another, and their ability to do so makes them admirable within the terms of their tales. In the Reeve's Tale, John's trick with the cradle is more ingenious, therefore somehow more admirable, than Aleyn's rough seduction of Malyne, even though Aleyn's pleasure with the daughter would presumably

³⁴Nature and Love in the Late Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 65, 66.

³⁵"Comic Irony in the Miller's Tale," Boston University Studies in English 4 (1960): 119.

have been greater than his comrade's pleasure with the mother.

One unusual pattern common to most of the churls' tales is that the victim of the tale belongs to the same social order as its narrator. The Miller, Reeve, and Shipman narrate tales of commoners outwitted by clerks. The Friar and Summoner tell ones in which clerks are undone by commoners whom they have tried to victimize. The Merchant, who is newly and unhappily married, tells a tale of a husband duped by his quick-witted wife.

The genre of the churl's tale deserves fuller study than is possible here. However, even such a brief discussion of its characteristics as given here should make it possible to distinguish which of the similarities between the tales of the Miller and Reeve relate to their common genre, and which are specific to this pair of tales.

Genre characteristics shared by
the Miller's and Reeve's tales

Similarities between the tales of the Miller and Reeve which relate to their common genre as churls' tales have long been recognized by readers of Chaucer. Root suggested: "The point of strongest resemblance between the tales of the Miller and Reeve is their extreme indecency." Both are tales of "harlotrie", in the form of comic sexual escapades, told in "cherles termes" (3917). While few modern readers would agree with Root's assertion: "It

would have been perfectly possible to give a true picture of the varied humanity which made up the Canterbury pilgrimage, without suffering these churls to tell their 'cherles tales', which no sophistry can elevate to true art,"³⁶ it is difficult to argue with his perception of the indecency common to these tales.

Both the Miller and Reeve tell tales that are short and of fairly limited scope. Both contain few characters beyond the core group that is common to the tales of the first fragment, whereas the Knight's Tale adds to the core group two hundred knights, thousands of spectators, and an entire hierarchy of gods. Similarly, whereas the essential events of the Knight's Tale are spread over many years, those of the Miller's Tale occupy perhaps a few weeks, and those of the Reeve's only one day and night. The churls' tales of the first fragment are also severely limited geographically, with the main action of each tale occurring within the building and grounds of a private, fourteenth century, English dwelling. In the Reeve's Tale, most of the action actually takes place in one room. In contrast, in the Knight's Tale, events are spread over ancient Greece, though centered in Athens, the grove, and the amphitheater. Chaucer's other churls' tales generally share the limited scope of those of the first fragment. All are built on a

³⁶Robert K. Root, The Poetry of Chaucer (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1906), pp. 175-76.

fairly small cast of characters, and occupy a fairly short period of time. The main events of the Merchant's and Shipman's tales both occur within the building and grounds of a private home, though these are considerably more elaborate than those of the first fragment.

Whereas the Knight's Tale presented an ordered world ruled by a social hierarchy headed by Theseus, the churls' tales present a disordered world in which each character pursues his own ends without regard for morality or propriety. In this world an older man does not occupy the position of power and respect which Theseus holds in the Knight's Tale; rather, an older man is likely to be the victim of schemes devised by young men and women. John, the carpenter, Symkyn, January, and the merchant of the Shipman's Tale are all cuckolded by means of a trick. In addition, John and Symkyn suffer physically, and Symkyn and the merchant are cheated out of money owed to them. In the tales of the Miller, Reeve and Shipman the seducers are not only guests of the husband, but are also clerks, and so ignore not only common morality and social propriety, but also the more exacting ethical standards of their professions.

The worldliness of clerks is one of the axioms of Chaucer's churls' tales. Those who do not regard their vocation as means of furthering their personal ends, simply disregard it completely. The summoner of the Friar's Tale

and the friar of the Summoner's Tale regard their positions as means of enriching themselves. In the Reeve's Tale the town parson not only has a daughter but is prepared to spend church money to see his grand-daughter married well, using the reasoning:

For hooly chirches good moot been despended
On hooly chirches blood, that is descended.
Therefore he wolde his hooly blood honoure,
Though that he hooly chirche sholde devoure.
(3983-86)

As well as using their positions to gain monetary advantage, the clerks of the churls' tales are not above using their functions and knowledge to further their sexual exploits. In the Miller's Tale Nicholas uses the biblical story of Noah to dupe John. Absolon uses his role as Herod in a morality play to impress Alisoun, and when wooing her at the window he even uses echoes of the Song of Songs to make his love complaint more appealing.³⁷

The emphasis on misuse of Christian materials in the

³⁷ R. E. Kaske, "The Canticum Canticorum in The Miller's Tale," Studies in Philology 59 (1962): 479-500, discusses the use of the Song of Songs in the tale, but treats it as an element added by Chaucer to suggest alternate standards of behaviour to those used by the characters of this tale. I would suggest that Absolon's use of the Song of Songs is consistent with the general tendency to use Christian materials in the pursuit of worldly aims in Chaucer's churls' tales. Jesse M. Gellrich, "The Parody of Medieval Music in the Miller's Tale," Journal of English and Germanic Philology 73 (1974): 176-88, establishes that the liturgical material used by Absolon would have been familiar to him as it was used regularly in church. His use of it can then be a realistic detail, as well as a normative one.

"cherles tales" is not simply an attempt to depict the corruption of the fourteenth-century clergy. Rather it forms part of a general pattern according to which anything can be used for any purpose it will successfully serve. The Christian faith, according to this pattern, is merely another object available for use. The churls' tales are filled with examples of characters using any tool that will serve their purposes without regard for propriety. In the Shipman's Tale John, the monk, uses money borrowed from the merchant to purchase a night of pleasure with his wife. In the Miller's Tale Absolon, though something of a dandy, is not committed to a courtly approach to matters of love; he is prepared to use any approach that he believes will win Alisoun including offering her money (3380). Absolon believes that "som folk wol ben wonnen for richesse, / And somme for strokes, and somme for gentillesse" (3381-82); he does not see any of these approaches as either proper or improper, though in a particular case some may be effective, and others not. Later in the tale Absolon uses the first available tool that will accomplish his revenge and inverts a biblical image by "turning a plowshare into a sword."³⁸ John, the carpenter, is prepared to believe that a kneading trough will serve the function of an ark. The characters of the Reeve's Tale demonstrate a similar willingness to use

³⁸W. F. Bolton, "The 'Miller's Tale': An Interpretation," Mediaeval Studies 24 (1962): 93.

any means that will further their ends. Unable to cheat the young clerks in the mill, Symkyn goes outside to loose their horse. John and Aleyn are prepared to use Symkyn's wife and daughter to gain revenge on him. John uses the child's cradle to trick the mother into sleeping with him.

Not only are the characters of the churls' tales prepared to use any means to gain their ends, the narrators themselves behave in more or less the same fashion. The Reeve, Friar, and Summoner use even their tales as weapons. In his prologue the Miller carries the notion that a thing should only be judged by the purposes it serves even farther than the tales do. He discusses the relationship between a man and his wife as follows:

An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf
Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf..
So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,
Of the remenant nedeth nat enquire.
(3163-66)

In other words, so long as a wife serves a husband's purposes, he has no need to inquire further of her behaviour, be it proper or improper.

The churls' tales present a world in which effectiveness is the only measure of an action or object. Anything can be used for any purpose it will serve, and it matters little whether the means used or the ends sought are sacred or profane, dignified or undignified, moral or immoral. In contrast, the Knight's Tale is concerned throughout with ritual, and observance of due propriety. Emelye must be won,

not by a simple fight in the grove, but by an elaborate formal tournament. The tale is filled with formal events: marriages, funerals, religious observances consisting of prayers and sacrifices, and even speeches and arguments have a formal quality. The tale strives to present a vision of order, a world ruled by Theseus in accord with rules of propriety and morality that are accepted by all its inhabitants. This world contrasts sharply with the unrulable world of the Miller's and Reeve's tales in which each character ruthlessly pursues his own advantage. As churls' tales these two are linked closely to one another in the type of world and characters they present, and also they are clearly distinguished from the Knight's Tale, which belongs to a wholly different genre. As well as sharing a large number of genre characteristics, these tales are linked to one another by a number of more specific details which are not shared by Chaucer's other churls' tales.

Details linking the Miller's and Reeve's tales

Perhaps the most obvious of the details linking the tales of the Miller and Reeve is their choice of settings. The first is set in Oxford, and the second near Cambridge. Not only are these towns linked by being the two major university towns in England, for Chaucer's original audience they also would be linked by the fact that in 1388, shortly before the probable date for the composition of these tales,

"the King's Council met at Oxford and Parliament at Cambridge."³⁹ The use of university towns as settings permits the use of students as characters, which forms another link between the two tales. Nicholas, in the Miller's Tale, and John and Aleyn in the Reeve's are all described as "yonge povre scolers" (4002, see also 3190). None of Chaucer's other tales use Oxford or Cambridge as settings, or use students as major characters.

The tales of the Miller and Reeve are also similar in using artisans in the role of the older man. John, the carpenter, and Symkyn, the miller, belong to the class of skilled tradesmen who emerged as a powerful element of English society during the fourteenth century.⁴⁰ The General Prologue describes a number of artisans, including the five guildsmen, as well as the Reeve, who is also a carpenter, and the Miller. However, none of the guildsmen tells a tale, and none of the Canterbury Tales other than those of the Miller and Reeve use artisans as characters.

The tales of the Miller and Reeve are also distinct from Chaucer's other tales in their dependence on a nocturnal setting. Other tales may have a few nocturnal events

³⁹Works, ed. Robinson, p. 687 in a note to 3921. For Robinson's suggestions as to the probable date for the composition of these tales, see p. 683, the general note to the Miller's Prologue.

⁴⁰I will discuss the shifting balance of power among the trades in my discussion of the Cook's Tale.

but in both these tales most of the major events occur at night. Among the other tales, only the Wife of Bath's Tale has a significant part of its action set at night. However, even this tale does not make the night setting an essential element in plot development, whereas the tales of the Miller and Reeve both require the darkness of night to make their plots possible. Neither the misplaced kiss nor the trick with the cradle are possible without absolute darkness in which characters are unable to see what others are doing. Absolon's revenge depends on one of the characters inside the house believing that the darkness permits the kiss to be repeated, and Symkyn is finally subdued when the one shaft of light in the otherwise darkened room allows his wife to take aim on what she believes to be Aleyn's nightcap. In contrast to the dependence of the Miller's and Reeve's tales on complete darkness, the Knight's Tale depends on the full visibility of daylight for its pageant-like aspects to be effective. Events such as the tournament, the funeral, Theseus' speech before parliament, and the eventual marriage of Palamon and Emelye are public events which must be participated in or witnessed by as many people as possible to have any real meaning. Not only do all major events of this tale take place during the day, but their essential nature depends on daylight. Even when, two hours before dawn, Palamon rises to pray to Venus, night is miraculously transformed into day: "Although it nere nat day by houres

two, /Yet song the larke" (2211-12), ~

Other points of similarity between the Miller's and Reeve's tales depend on their nocturnal settings. In both of the tales, the older man sleeps through most of the action, while the other characters are all awake and busy. John in his tub and Symkyn in his bed snore through the night (3647, 4163), unaware of what is happening to their women-folk only a short distance away. Near dawn the older men are brought back into the action, only to be humiliated and injured. John crashes to the ground, breaking his arm, and is held to be mad when he tries to explain what has happened. Symkyn is awakened by Aleyn's disparagement of his daughter, only to be felled by his wife and beaten by the clerks. The two tales are also linked to one another by the repetition of a precise detail at the same point in their respective plots. In both tales the twist of the plot which allows the second young man to gain his triumph depends on one of the characters having "risen for to pisse" (3798). In the Miller's Tale, at the time of Absolon's return to the window:

This Nicholas was risen for to pisse,
And thoughte he wolde amenden al the jape;
He sholde kisse his ers er that he scape.
(3798-3800)

In the Reeve's Tale John moves the cradle:

Soone after this the wyf hir rowtyng leet,
And gan awake, and wente hire out to pisse,
And cam agayn, and gan hir cradel mysse,
(4214-16)

While the crudity of this detail is in keeping with the

general nature of the churls' tales, its recurrence at precisely the same point in each of these two tales makes it a significant link between them.

We have seen that, in addition to sharing the core of basic plot elements common to all the tales of the first fragment, the tales of the Miller and Reeve share a great many elements which are related to their common genre, that of the churl's tale. These genre characteristics clearly distinguish these tales from the Knight's Tale which belongs to a very different type. These two tales also are linked by a number of quite specific details shared by no other tales, which serve to distinguish them from Chaucer's other churls' tales, as well as from the Knight's Tale.

The Knight's Tale and the Reeve's Tale

Although the Knight's Tale and the Reeve's Tale do not share the kind of obvious genre characteristics which link the Miller's Tale to the Reeve's, nevertheless they do have in common a considerable number of important characteristics. The links between these two tales by establishing some sort of connection between them in spite of the fact that they are separated by the Miller's Tale help strengthen the overall unity of the fragment. The similarities between the tales of the Knight and Reeve are particularly deserving of discussion in that they have generally been overlooked by critics who have noted links between both of the other pairs of tales, but have failed to discuss

adequately the patterns of similarity which bind the whole of the first fragment into a unified work of art.⁴¹

A number of the similarities between the tales of the Knight and Reeve are related to characterization. The characters of each tale are introduced in the same order and in a similar manner. First the older man is introduced, his dwelling place is noted, and a brief summary of his accomplishments is given (859-867 and 3921-41). Symkyn's large assortment of weaponry (3929-33) and his physical strength establish him as a sort of rustic equivalent of Theseus, the mighty "conquerour" (862), as well as linking him to the Miller of the General Prologue. Both Theseus and Symkyn are presented as strong, aggressive characters quite unlike the weak and foolish John of the Miller's Tale.

After introducing the older man, both the Knight and the Reeve proceed to introduce his wife and to give details of their marriage (866-70 and 3942-68). In both cases the details of the marriage are unusual: Theseus' marriage is

⁴¹One of the only critics to have perceived any sort of link between the tales of the Knight and Reeve is Morton W. Bloomfield, "The Miller's Tale -- an UnBoethian Interpretation" in Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies, eds. Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1970), pp. 205-211. He perceives these as "two stories of a just and ordered world," in contrast to the Miller's Tale, which he sees as "a story of an irrational, unjust world" (pp. 206-7). Such a reading of the Reeve's Tale seems to fail to recognize the excessive nature of the revenge which Osewold and his clerks take upon their foes.

the result of a military victory, Symkyn's the result of a commercial transaction. In contrast, John the carpenter's marriage is one of love (see 3222) even though the love may only be one-sided.

The introduction of the wife is followed by the introduction of a younger woman (871 and 3969-76). Emelye, in the Knight's Tale is Ypolita's sister and Malyne in the Reeve's Tale is the daughter of Symkyn and his wife. In introducing two active women into his plot, the Reeve adds a new development to the pattern common to the two preceding tales, which were concerned with the competition of male characters for one available woman. The Knight's Tale does contain two women who could be active characters, but the role of Ypolita remains undeveloped. She reappears frequently throughout the tale but never has any significant function within it. The Reeve's Tale makes both of its women available as sources of sexual solace for its young men. In doing so it expands the basic character group of the other two tales, but it follows the Knight's Tale, which potentially contains two active women, more closely than the Miller's, in which the only woman other than Alisoun is Gille, the maid, who is mentioned only in passing (3556).

The tales of both the Knight and the Reeve introduce the two young men together after all the other main characters have been introduced. Even the words used to introduce the two pairs of characters are strikingly similar:

"Arcita highte that oon, /And that oother knyght highte Palamon" (1013-14); and "John highte that oon, and Aleyn highte that oother" (4013). The similarity of the young men of each pair is stressed by the similarity of their birth: Palamon and Arcite are "of sustren two yborn" (1019); and Aleyn are described: "Of o toun were they born, that highte Strother" (4014). The town where these two young clerks were born is small and remote,⁴² reinforcing their essential similarity for Chaucer's audience. While the two young clerks of the Reeve's Tale do not share many of the attributes of the young nobles of the Knight's Tale, the two tales are similar in each having a pair of very similar young men as main characters. Palamon and Arcite are both examples of what young knights should be, but they are not clearly distinguished from one another. Neither Theseus nor Emelyne can choose between them except by battle. Before the tournament no spectator can perceive any advantage to either side (2590-93). Another indicator of their similarity is ability of critics to argue for

⁴²J. R. R. Tolkien comments upon the name, "Strother," in "Chaucer as a Philologist: The Reeve's Tale," Transactions of the Philological Society, 1934, pp. 56-57. The name "is, in fact, a dialect word meaning 'marsh' ... peculiar to the northern region, and there frequent in names. Chaucer could hardly have chosen a name from among all the northern hamlets more local or appropriate."

diametrically opposed interpretations of their relative natures.⁴³ In the Reeve's Tale, John and Aleyn are similarly undifferentiated. They meet different fates within the tale, but the differences are largely differences of opportunity rather than differences grounded in their individual natures. They are both presented as typical young clerks, and their individual natures are not developed at all within the tale. In contrast to the general similarity of the young men of the tales of the Knight and Reeve, those of the Miller's Tale are clearly distinguished from one another. Their introductions are separated by ninety-one lines which include the introduction of Alisoun and Nicholas' winning of her. Each of the young men of this tale is introduced with an extended description of his personal characteristics (3190-3220, 3312-38), whereas the young men of the other two tales are introduced with a description of characteristics common to both of them (1010-1024 and 4002-15) and their individual characteristics are never discussed at any length.

⁴³Hoxie N. Fairchild, in "Active Arcite, Contemplative Palamon," Journal of English and Germanic Philology 26 (1927): 285-93, differentiates between these two characters according to the pattern suggested by his title. Albert H. Marckwardt, in "Characterization in Chaucer's Knight's Tale," University of Michigan Contributions to Modern Philology 5 (April 1947): 23 argues for the opposite interpretation of their natures: "Palamon is the active man Arcite, on the other hand is a more profound thinker, but less ready to act, even when he has the opportunity. In this sense he is the contemplative and introvert."

Not only does the Reeve's Tale introduce its characters in the same order as the Knight's, it also resembles that tale in certain aspects of its general handling of those characters. In both tales the women are essentially inactive and have virtually no role beyond being the suitable object of the young men's attentions. In neither tale are women given any control over the relationships they enter into. In the Knight's Tale, Theseus offers Emelye as the prize for the tournament without ever asking her consent (1845-69), and without considering her wish to remain a virgin (2300-11). In the final scene, Theseus does not wait for Emelye's agreement before offering her to Palamon (3075-93). Root commented on Emelye's nature: "She is the golden apple of strife, and later the victor's prize; but, consciously and of her own volition, she never affects the action of the tale."⁴⁴ In the Reeve's Tale, Malyne accepts her nocturnal visitor even though there is no previous indication that she desired his attentions. Even her consent to Aleyn's approach takes the passive form of non-resistance, rather than that of a positive act. Only in the morning, in revealing the location of the cake, does she perform any act which affects the course of the tale. Her

⁴⁴Poetry, p. 171. Allen B. Cameron, in "The Heroine in The Knight's Tale," Studies in Short Fiction 5 (1967-68): 121, suggests "her function is less as a character ... than as a symbolic and allegorical figure."

mother carries passivity to an extreme in apparently never realizing she has taken a lover, for when she wakes up she still believes she is sleeping with Symkyn (4286-91). The women of the Reeve's Tale differ from Emelye in that they are simply available sexual objects to be used at will by the men, whereas she is a lady available for marriage but not for any less honourable type of activity. Whatever the difference in the propriety of the action depicted in the two tales, the three women are essentially inactive characters who have their lives determined by the men around them. In contrast, Alisoun, in the Miller's Tale, is a well developed, active character. Though Nicholas' approach is forceful, her acceptance of him is active rather than passive, and she later refuses Absolon as unworthy (3710-11). She participates in Nicholas' plan to dupe John and initiates the trick of the misplaced kiss entirely on her own. Unlike the essentially passive women of the other two tales, she has her own desires and an ability to act on them independently.

Partially as a result of the passivity of their women, the tales of the Knight and Reeve both devote considerably more time and interest to relationships between men than to relationships between men and women. In the Knight's Tale the love which Palamon and Arcite both feel for Emelye causes much of the action, but the central concern of the tale is not the love itself, but the rivalry it

engenders. The tale devotes most of its length to the arguments and battles between the two young men and almost none of it to any type of interaction between the lovers and their lady. If the Knight's Tale offers a pattern of love causing strife between men, the Reeve's Tale inverts that pattern into one of strife between men causing sexual escapades. Aleyn's speech before approaching Malyne makes no mention of the possible charms of the young lady, but rather concerns itself with the redress Aleyn feels he has a right to after his day of humiliation. Similarly John's speech before moving the cradle ignores the wife's dubious appeal, and concentrates on the ridicule John fears from his comrade. In neither case does the woman in question have any particular appeal for the young man who wins her, she is simply an object to be used by him in his pursuit of his objectives in relation to the other men of the tale. In contrast to the other two tales, the Miller's Tale is relatively unconcerned with conflicts between men. *Alisoun forms the link which connects the various events and the men enter the plot through their relationships to her. Nicholas demonstrates no particular hostility towards John, but rather seems to view him as an obstacle blocking full enjoyment of Alisoun. Neither of the young clerks seem to be aware of his rival before Absolon appears at the window to demand a kiss. Even Absolon's success in branding his rival depends more on chance than premeditated malice, for

he could not be certain who would appear at the window.

In the tales of both the Knight and Reeve the most highly developed character is the older man. He is the only character who can be developed at all fully in that, in both tales, the women are passive and the young men relatively undifferentiated from one another. Both older men are very powerful, though Symkyn's power is merely physical, whereas Theseus' power has formal and moral elements as well as physical (that is, military) ones. Theseus is not only the ruler of the world of the Knight's Tale in a political sense, he is also the only earthly figure who can exert any real influence on events. He conquers and imprisons the young knights, organizes the tournament, persuades Palamon and Emelye to marry, and officiates at the wedding. Root comments on Theseus: "He is, moreover, the motive power of the plot; his acts and decisions really determine the whole story."⁴⁵ Though Symkyn is hardly a figure of power comparable to Theseus, his role in his tale is also highly developed. The tale opens with an extended description of him (3925-62, 3987-4001), which is much fuller than the descriptions of the other characters of the tale. This description serves two purposes: it links Symkyn with the Miller of the General Prologue, and it establishes his social pretensions. The trick by which he cheats the

⁴⁵Poetry, p. 171.

clerks, his behaviour as a host, and his final beating are all depicted in some detail. The attention which the Reeve's Tale focuses on Symkyn makes his humiliation both more complete and more acceptable. Theseus' character is well developed in order that he may be glorified and used as a vehicle for philosophy, while Symkyn's is developed to make his humiliation more complete and to make the tale a more effective weapon of revenge. Nevertheless, in both tales the role of the older man is highly developed. In contrast, John's role in the Miller's Tale remains relatively undeveloped. He is introduced in three lines, whereas all the other characters of this tale are introduced with full descriptions of at least thirty lines (3190-3220, 3233-70, 3312-42). He is absent from the tale for both Nicholas' original approach to Alisoun, and their subsequent conspiracy. Through most of the action John hangs inertly from the ceiling in a tub. He is possibly the least developed character of the tale.

As well as having many similarities in basic characterization, the tales of the Knight and Reeve are linked by some significant plot parallels. The most important of these is an entire plot sequence which is common to both tales but is completely omitted from the Miller's Tale. Both the Knight's Tale and the Reeve's Tale begin by depicting a series of events in which the older man defeats the two younger men. In the Knight's Tale Theseus wages war on

Thebes, and his victory is absolute: "by assaut he wan the citee after, /And rente adoun bothe wall and sparre and rafter" (989-90). The defeat of Palamon and Arcite is also absolute; pillagers find them in a heap of bodies, and carry them, neither "fully quyke, ne fully dede" (1015), to Theseus who condemns them to perpetual imprisonment. In the Reeve's Tale, the clerks' precautions fail to save them from being cheated and humiliated by Symkyn. Their defeat, like that of Palamon and Arcite, is absolute:

Wery and weet, as beest is in the reyn,
Comth sely John, and with him comth Aleyn.
"Allas," quod John, "the day that I was born!
Now are we dryve til nethyng and til scorn.
Oure corn is stoln, men wil us fooles calle,
Bathe the wardeyn and oure felawes alle,
And namely the millere, weylaway!"

(4107-13)

In both tales the two young men are forced to reside with the older man as a direct result of their defeat. Palamon and Arcite are sent by Theseus to his prison in Athens. Aleyn and John, unable to return home after spending all day chasing their horse, are obliged to request Symkyn's hospitality (4117-19). In both tales, both young men are defeated together, and together forced to reside with the older man. In contrast, in the Miller's Tale, John has no initial victory, Nicholas is a boarder by choice, and he and Absolon do not come into contact with one another until late in the tale.

In the tales of both the Knight and Reeve the initial sequence in which the older man defeats the younger ones is

important and is dealt with at some length. It helps to establish the older man's position of power within the tale and to emphasize the essential similarity of the two younger men. In both tales' later action, including the love subplot, only develops as a result of the older man's initial victory and the younger men's enforced residence with him.

After the initial sequence the tales of the Knight and Reeve bear fairly limited resemblance to one another beyond both sharing the plot elements common to the whole fragment. The fight which ends the tale does resemble the tournament more closely than does the single stroke administered by Absolon. Both battles are scenes of hectic, disorganized violence. Even the language used to describe the two battle scenes is in some ways similar. Both passages make considerable use of alliteration, they tend to use Anglo-Saxon words rather than ones of French origin, and use pronouns without clear antecedents rather than names:

The helmes they tohewen and toshrede;
Out brest the blood with stierne stremes rede;
With myghty maces the bones they tobrete.
He thurgh the thikkeste of the throng gan threste;
Ther stomblen steedes stronge, and down gooth al;
He rolleth under foot as dooth a bal;
He foyneth on his feet with his tronchoun,
And he hym hurtleth with his hors adoun;
(2609-16)

And he hente hym despitously agayn,
And on the nose he smoot hym with his fest.
Down ran the bloody strem upon his brest;
And in the floor, with nose and mouth tobroke,
They walwe as doon two pigges in a poke;
And up they goon, and down agayn anon,
(4274-79)

The ambiguity of the pronouns in each passage gives a sense of the confusion within each battle. Phrases are short and choppy with their sense rarely extending beyond one line, adding to the impression of hectic activity.⁴⁶ Aleyn's injury, suffered at the hands of Symkyn, appears to be an inversion of that of Arcite. Arcite had "his brest tobrosten" (2691) and "blood yronnen in his face" (2693). Aleyn's injury is the reverse: "Doun ran the bloody strem upon his brest; /... with nose and mouth tobroke" (4276-77).

The Knight's Tale and the Reeve's Tale are thus similar in a number of their aspects. Close parallels between them, both in characterization and in plot, do exist. Many of the elements they share help to distinguish these two tales from that of the Miller. Clearly any parallels which link these two tales which differ so strikingly in style and tone, and which, in the text, are separated by a third tale, are important factors in the structure of the fragment as a whole and must contribute significantly to its unity.

⁴⁶ Robinson, in Works, pp. 680-81 in a note to lines 2601 ff., comments upon the passage in the Knight's Tale and its relationship to alliterative verse forms. I merely wish to suggest that the passage in the Reeve's Tale exhibits similar characteristics.

CHAPTER III

THE FOUR TALES OF THE FIRST FRAGMENT

The tales of the first fragment, though they are bound together by complex patterns of similarity, are nevertheless, in many respects distinct and individual works. Each tale takes material which is common to the fragment, manipulates it in its own unique way, and adds to it a considerable amount of material which is not paralleled elsewhere in the fragment. The result is a tale which is at once an individual work of art and a part of the larger artistic structure of the first fragment, which in turn is only one part of the Canterbury Tales.

I now intend to analyse the process by which the tales of the first fragment which resemble one another in a great many ways are distinguished from one another and fashioned into individual works. My method will be to examine the features which most clearly distinguish each tale, the modifications each makes upon the basic plot elements common to the whole fragment, and the nature and extent of additions to those plot elements. This approach may entail some repetition of ideas discussed in the examinations of the different pairs of tales, but I will strive to keep such repetition to a minimum. I will not attempt to give a full

or complete reading of any of the tales, as such a study of any of them would be beyond the scope of my present work. Rather, I wish only to examine each tale within its context, and to attempt to determine its contribution to the overall artistic shape of the first fragment.

The Knight's Tale

The most obvious characteristics distinguishing the Knight's Tale from others in the fragment are stylistic ones. The Knight's Tale is a courtly romance, told in high style and is quite unlike the short, coarse, comic tales of the Miller and Reeve. The high style of the tale requires not only that its language be suitable, but also that its characters be noble and that their actions and emotions be consistent with the values of polite society. If one uses a broad understanding of the term, style, in the Knight's Tale, is no mere ornament of the narrative but rather an essential part of the work. The tale is not a simple narrative about two lovers, nor a discussion of courtly love, but rather an evocation of the noble life. The language of the tale, and the nature of the characters and plot all contribute to "a splendidly pictured tapestry"⁴⁷ which presents the narrator's chivalrous ideal.

In an influential discussion of the tale, Charles

⁴⁷Root, Poetry, p. 172.

Muscatine suggested:

The Knight's Tale is essentially neither a story nor a static picture, but rather a sort of poetic pageant. Its design expresses the nature of the noble life, The story is immediately concerned with those two noble activities, love and chivalry, but even more important is the general tenor of the noble life, the pomp and ceremony, the dignity and power, and particularly the repose and assurance with which the exponent of nobility invokes order The society depicted is one in which form is full of significance, in which life is conducted at a dignified processional pace.⁴⁸

Muscatine's discussion of the tale's pageant-like aspects is extremely useful. The tale is built of balanced and repeated formal elements. The speeches of Palamon and Arcite in prison, the descriptions of the temples, the forces supporting each of the lovers and the prayers of the lovers and Emelye all precisely balance one another. The tale both begins and ends with a wedding, a battle and a funeral.⁴⁹ When Palamon and Arcite meet in the grove, they repeat in abbreviated form the argument they had in prison (1580-84, 1604-8 and 1128-86). Arcite's "observaunce to May" (1500, see also 1045, 1047) is an almost exact repetition of Emelye's, both consisting of singing, roaming up and down, and making a garland (1040-55, 1497-1515). In contrast, the Miller's Tale makes clear that events are individual and not repeatable. The belief in the

⁴⁸ Chaucer and the French Tradition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p. 181.

⁴⁹ See Frost, Interpretation, p. 293.

possibility of a second flood or a second kiss lead John and Nicholas to harm.

Formal elements contribute to the order of the Knight's Tale, but the Knight's vision requires further that all elements of the tale be in accord with his chivalric ideal. "Even persons who appear only briefly in the action are of rank."⁵⁰ Not only persons but their actions must approach the ideal as nearly as possible. The love the young knights feel for Emelye must be unmixed with sexual desire, and marriage is their only legitimate goal. Theseus stops the duel in the woods to transform it into a tournament. Before the battle the various characters pray to their respective gods in elaborate temples. Arcite is given a massive, formal funeral. Palamon and Emelye are brought together, not by discreet private counselling, but rather by a speech before parliament, and the tale ends with them united in the ceremony of marriage by Theseus. The nature of the noble life, as presented in the tale, is that for every occasion there is a suitable elaborate ritual or formal speech. Action can only properly be taken if its form, as well as its purpose, is in keeping with noble ideals and standards of conduct. Needless to say, this vision is very different from the doctrine of utility presented by the churls' tales.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 299.

The Knight's vision of the noble life depends upon a stable and ordered society. Theseus is absolute ruler of Athens, and all the earthly events of the tale. "Theseus, 'this noble duc,' stands at the apex of the nobility who populate the poem."⁵¹ His position is not challenged even by the young knights who are his mortal enemies. Even before Theseus shows mercy to the young men, Palamon addresses him as "a rightful lord and juge" (1719). When he offers to spare their lives, the young knights do not hesitate to formalize their subservience: "they hym sworn his axying faire and weel, /And hym of lordshipe and of mercy preyde" (1826-27). Theseus is throughout the most powerful character of the tale and the one who is able to act most effectively. He conquers Thebes and Femenye, presides over the tournament, organizes Arcite's funeral, and arranges the marriage of Palamon and Emelye. His position of power never changes throughout the tale. In contrast, the old men of the other tales of the fragment are both ultimately the victims of events. Theseus acts as the Knight's representative within the tale, and his strong position is essential to the Knight's vision of a hierarchically ordered society.

As a result of its much greater scope, the Knight's

⁵¹ John Halverson, "Aspects of Order in the Knight's Tale," Studies in Philology 57 (1960): 616.

Tale contains a great deal of material not paralleled in later tales. Much of this material: formal speeches, extended descriptions, prayers and philosophical discussions, is related to the formal aspects of the tale discussed above. The greater scope of this tale also involves a much larger cast of characters than that used by later tales of the fragment. The Knight's Tale, beyond its basic core of characters, includes several hundred knights, spectators, courtiers and parliamentarians. The main function which these additional characters serve is not so much to further plot developments as to allow the Knight to depict events on a grand scale. More important is the inclusion in the tale of the gods who have no parallel in the later tales. The gods are active, willful characters who ultimately control the crucial events of the tale. The hierarchy of gods is designed to parallel the hierarchy of the earthly characters in much the same way as the character groupings of the later tales parallel those of the Knight's.

The function of the gods within the tale takes on particular significance due to the inability of the human characters to act decisively. R. M. Lumiansky analyses each of the crucial events of the tale and concludes: "almost without exception the Knight accounts for each event by suggesting that it resulted from an influence outside the individual."⁵² It is "by aventure or cas" (1074) that

⁵²Of Sondry Folk: The Dramatic Principle in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1955), p. 35.

Palamon first sees Emelye; Arcite's return to Athens is prompted by Mercury (1384-92); the meeting of the two young knights in the grove happens "by aventure" (1506, 1516), and Theseus is guided there by "destinee" (1663); finally, the gods control the events of the tournament. The characters of the tale seem virtually incapable of effective action. Emelye is completely passive. The young knights are prepared to battle interminably for love but are incapable of approaching their lady. Theseus is the most effective of the characters, but even his elaborate tournament does not solve the problem of who shall marry Emelye which is ultimately solved, not by Palamon's defeat, but by Arcite's accident. The Knight's Tale has carried the chivalric ideal to an unworkable extreme. The ordered, decorous designs of Theseus cannot succeed in resolving the central problems of the tale without the intervention of the gods who act without regard for dignity or decorum. William R. Cozart is possibly too extreme in suggesting that Arcite's death is "the result of a conflict among the whimsical and destructive gods."⁵³ However, the gods who ultimately rule the tale are clearly not bound by the rules of propriety which are of such great importance to its

⁵³ "Chaucer's Knight's Tale: A Philosophical Re-Appraisal of Medieval Romance," in Medieval Epic to the "Epic Theater" of Brecht, eds. Rosario P. Armato and John M. Salek (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1968), p. 29.

characters and, presumably its narrators. Mercury persuades Arcite to return to Athens by deceiving him with the ambiguous promise: "Ther is thee shapen of thy wo an epde" (1392). Saturn inverts the result of the formal tournament by means of a trick. Theseus' final speech, which purports to resolve the problems of the tale, is not entirely successful in that it confuses Jupiter (3035, 3069) with the "Firste Moevere" (2987). Jupiter is a planet and must act from within the planetary spheres, and has already appeared in the tale as an ineffectual busybody (2442). The First Mover, on the other hand, by definition acts from beyond the planetary spheres.

The Knight's Tale does present a vision of order, but it is the vision, not of Chaucer, but of his narrator, the Knight. Judith S. Herz suggests: "He ought to understand the full implications of his tale, but he does not. Chaucer sees far more than the Knight and would impose his conclusions on the Knight's vision."⁵⁴ Despite all of its formality and ritual, the Knight's Tale contains within it elements of disorder. The violence of the battles of the tale, the cruelty of imprisonment, the extreme passion of the young knights, and the agony of Arcite's death are elements which cannot easily be incorporated into the order

⁵⁴ "Chaucer's Elegiac Knight," Criticism 6 (1964), 223.

and decorum which surrounds the wedding of Palamon and Emelye.⁵⁵ In drawing his tale to its conclusion the Knight overlooks these elements, just as, in his final speech, Theseus ignores Saturn, the malevolent god of disorder, who has ruled the events of the tale. More important, at least in the context of the pilgrimage, the Knight's vision of order fails to incorporate into itself the churls who will not be bound by rules of dignity and decorum. Within the tale itself, at the death of Arcite, the women of Athens cry out: "Why woldestow be deed, .../And haddest gold ynough, and Emelye?" (2835-36), giving voice to attitudes that could never be incorporated into the Knight's vision. On the Canterbury pilgrimage the churls have the opportunity to answer the Knight's incomplete vision with their own various versions of the disorder that actually shapes their lives.

The Knight's Tale presents an idealistic vision of order within the noble life. Chaucer recognizes the value

⁵⁵A number of critics have perceived elements of disorder beneath the apparent order of the Knight's Tale. Joseph Westlund, in "The Knight's Tale as an Impetus for Pilgrimage," Philological Quarterly 43 (1964): 526, suggests that the tale "presents the continual subversion of noble efforts to bring order out of disorder." Kathleen A. Blake, in "Order and the Noble Life in Chaucer's Knight's Tale," Modern Language Quarterly 34 (1973): 8, argues: "Though Theseus appears to offer an ordering and resolving force, it is clear by the end that the force he wields is not effective to those purposes." She also suggests that "the Knight reveals in his tale certain blind spots in the ideal of the noble life, of which life he is himself a representative, as well as Duke Theseus" (p. 18).

of this vision, but refrains from committing himself wholeheartedly to it. He does not present it as a final or complete answer to the questions touched on in the tale, but rather as a point from which the discourse of the Canterbury Tales can begin.

The Miller's Tale

The Miller's Tale is most clearly distinguished from the other tales of the first fragment by its characterization. The action of the tale follows directly from the nature of its well defined characters. All of these, with the exception of John, the carpenter, are introduced with portraits that are longer and fuller than comparable portraits in the other tales except that of Symkyn. Whereas the other tales contain strong older men, indistinguishable young men, and passive women, the Miller's Tale has a weak old man, clearly differentiated young men and an active woman. In his study of "Characterization in The Miller's Tale," Paul E. Beichner suggests that the control of action through characterization in this tale is an uniquely Chaucerian touch: "Chaucer was, it would seem, consciously creating people with whose characters the actions of a borrowed plot would not be inconsistent -- in other words, through character he was motivating as much as possible a fabliau whose action originally had little or nothing to do

with character."⁵⁶

John, the carpenter, is the least developed character of the tale. He is introduced with an extremely brief portrait and his major contribution to the action is to suspend himself from the ceiling for much of the tale. He is specifically described as being old (3225), whereas Theseus and Symkyn, though older than most other characters, are not old men. His jealousy is mentioned repeatedly (3224, 3294, 3404, 3851), but the tale does not include any jealous action on his part. He is portrayed much more sympathetically than such other jealous husbands as Symkyn, in the Reeve's Tale, and January, in the Merchant's, whose jealousy is more clearly depicted, though no more effective. In the Miller's portrayal, though John may be a jealous old fool, he remains good-hearted. He demonstrates genuine concern over Nicholas' feigned illness: "Me reweth soore of hende Nicholas" (3462), and his first thought, on hearing of the flood, is not of himself but of his wife: "Alas my wyf! / And shal she drenche? alas, myn Alisoun!" (3522-23). The generally sympathetic depiction of John has led Morton Bloomfield to perceive the tale as flawed: "From my point of view, and in my judgement, I think John is unjustly

⁵⁶In Chaucer Criticism, vol. 1: The Canterbury Tales, eds. Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), p. 118.

punished ... the morality of it is most unsatisfactory."⁵⁷ Perhaps the only answer to such a charge is that suggested by Derek S. Brewer; that in the comic world of the Miller's Tale the justice of John's punishment is not really an issue:

Great care is taken to make him a clear, but decidedly background character This is sufficient to make him real enough for the stratagem to have point, but not enough to make us think in terms of real life about the true pathos and bitterness of his situation.⁵⁸

Nicholas is depicted as combining fairly straightforward lust with an appreciation of a "jape" (3799). His approach to Alisoun is direct and immediate: "prively he caughte hire by the queynte, / ... And seyde, 'Lemman, love me al atones'" (3276-80). His approach, though abrupt, is still a bit more polite than Aleyn's virtual rape of Malyne in the Reeve's Tale. Nicholas does ask his lady's consent, but first he ensures that his grip is good. Though Nicholas is moved by lust, he is not merely a lecher. His plan of the kneading tubs is far more elaborate than would be necessary to dupe someone as credulous as John. His over-elaborate plan may suggest that he has a tendency to play games. Certainly, he does express his appreciation of

⁵⁷ Bloomfield, "UnBoethian Interpretation," p. 206.

⁵⁸ Chaucer (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1953), p. 144.

Alisoun's trick at the window, and attempts himself to "amenden al the jape" (3799) at Absolon's expense.

Nicholas, in duping John, displays a considerable measure of the cleverness which is so highly valued by the churls' tales, but he does not possess enough to save himself from ultimate injury.

Absolon is portrayed throughout as a kind of country dandy. He is extremely concerned with his appearance, and is described almost like a romance heroine with golden hair (3314) and grey eyes (3317). Beichner suggests: "Absolon indeed is more ladylike than Alisoun."⁵⁹ His approaches to his beloved are clearly designed to parody the pattern of courtly love presented in the Knight's Tale and in other contemporary literature. While certain features of Absolon's love directly parody that of Palamon and Arcite, other features relate to elements of courtly love which do not appear in the Knight's Tale. Like, Palamon and Arcite, Absolon falls in love at the sight of his lady, when he sees her performing some sort of religious observance (3307-11, 1042-47). Like them, he finds pleasure in the sight of his beloved: "To look on hire hym thoughte a myrie lyf" (3344). Absolon differs from the young men of the Knight's Tale in that he does attempt to approach his lady, whereas they simply fight with one another while

⁵⁹"Characterization," p. 119.

waiting for their fortunes to change. Absolon's absurd courtship consists of a list of approaches that could form the basis of a treatise on love:

Fro day to day this joly Absolon
So woweth hire that hym is wo bigon.
He waketh al the nyght and al the day;
He kembeth his lokkes brode, and made hym gay;
He woweth hire by meenes and brocage,
And swoor he wolde been hire owene page;
He syngeth, brokkynge as a nyghtyngale;
He sente hire pyment, meeth, and spiced ale,
And wafres pipyng hoot out of the gleede;
And, for she was of town, he profred meede.
For som folk wol ben wonnen for richesse,
And somme for strokes, and somme for gentillesse.
(3371-3382)

Unlike Nicholas, Absolon has not been described as having practical knowledge "of deerne love ... and of solas" (3200), and his elaborate courtship leads only to the humiliation of the kiss. Absolon is treated throughout as an absurd figure. Whereas even Malyne in the Reeve's Tale is described with the standard romance epithet "eyen greye as glas" (3974), Absolon has "eyen greye as goos" (3317). Absolon sings beneath his lady's window, and wakes her jealous husband (3364). When he arrives to beg a kiss, Absolon disturbs the "bisynesse" (3654) of Alisoun and her lover. Absolon's absurd courtship cannot be a parody of the actions of the lovers of the Knight's Tale, who do not approach their beloved, whereas he approaches his, but has no success. Rather, Absolon's courtship must parody the actions of the many courtly lovers of popular medieval

literature.⁶⁰

Alisoun is the only woman in the tales of the first fragment to receive any real degree of characterization. Whereas the women of the Knight's and Reeve's tales are the passive objects of men's actions, Alisoun is a well developed character who participates in the action of the tale as an equal to the other characters. Her description stresses active, animal images as opposed to the passive, floral images which describe Emelye (1035-1039). Alisoun is compared to a "wezele" (3234), a "swalwe" (3258), a "kyde or calf" (3260), and "a joly colt" (3263).⁶¹ As well as being described in animal terms, she is specifically said to be "wylde and yong" (3225) and to have "a likerous ye" (3244). Accordingly, she can hardly be expected to remain content in her marriage to an older man. When Nicholas approaches her she offers him a resistance which, though fairly spirited and characteristically animal-like, is almost a formality.

⁶⁰E. Talbot Donaldson, in "The Idiom of Popular Poetry in the Miller's Tale," English Institute Essays, 1950, pp. 116-40, discusses links between the tale and popular romances.

⁶¹The description of Alisoun is not purely in animal terms, though the animal imagery is most striking. Lowes, in Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 177, and Beichner, in "Characterizations," p. 123, both point out that she is described in terms relating to the English countryside. Kevin S. Kiernan, in "The Art of the Descending Catalogue and a Fresh Look at Alisoun," Chaucer Review 10 (1975-6), 1-16, relates her description to rhetorical traditions.

And she sproong as a colt dooth in the trave,
And with hir heed she wryed faste away,
And seyde, "I wol nat kisse thee, by my fey!
Why, lat be, "quod she," lat be, Nicholas,
Or I wol crie'out, harrow' and 'allas'!
Do wey youre handes, for youre curteisye!"
(3282-87)

After only another two lines, "she hir love hym graunted
"atte laste" (3290). In her rebuke to Absolon: "I love
another -- and elles I were to blame -- /Wel bet than thee,
by Jhesu, Absolon" (3710-11), Alisoun not only implies that
she would be to blame for loving someone like Absolon, but
also that she would be to blame for not loving at all.

Nicholas is a lover well suited to her. Not only does he
have the advantage of being "hende"⁶² in the sense of being
near at hand (3392-96), but more important he matches her
character well. She, like Nicholas, combines lust with an
appreciation of a "jape."

In the episode of the misplaced kiss Alisoun emerges
as a spirited, independent, quick-witted woman, almost the
equal of her namesake, the Wife of Bath. She sets up and
executes the trick entirely on her own and is astute enough
to let Nicholas accept the second kiss. Alisoun's role in
the tale is extremely important, and seems especially so in
contrast to the weak roles the women play in the other tales
of the first fragment. Of all the characters of the Miller's

⁶²See Paul E. Beichner, "Chaucer's Hende Nicholas,"
Mediaeval Studies 14 (1952): 151-53, for a discussion of the
various meanings of the word "hende" as they relate to this
tale.

Tale, only Alisoun is clever enough to have her pleasure, and still manage to escape all punishment. Trevor Whittock is perhaps overemphasizing her role in the tale in suggesting: "The positives of The Miller's Tale are largely embodied in Alisoun, and she may be the touchstone by which the other characters are tested," and "There can be little doubt of Chaucer's wholehearted endorsement of Alisoun and, all she represents: the animal vigour of unspoilt creation."⁶³ However, she is the most attractive character of the tale and functions as the dramatic centre of the plot: the men only enter the action through their desire for her.

Its well developed characterization most clearly differentiates the Miller's Tale from the other tales of the fragment. Chaucer uses his individualized characters to set the tale in motion by performing actions which are consistent with their nature, thereby avoiding the complex array of outside forces that control the action in the Knight's Tale and the spite that controls all events of the Reeve's Tale. In addition to being distinguished from the other tales by its characterization, the Miller's Tale is also distinguished by its extremely precise control over plot. Whereas the other tales present their various plot elements in a fairly straight-forward sequence, the Miller's Tale manages to keep all its sub-plots active

⁶³Reading, pp. 86, 87.

simultaneously. The kneading tubs, the bedroom, and the garden are all separate spheres of action, relating to different characters and sub-plots, all of which are kept separate and active until the action in all spheres reaches a climax with the cry of "water" (3815). Absolon is revenged, Nicholas is punished, and John, who has been out of sight and out of mind during most of the action, re-enters the tale with a crash. Nothing in the other tales can compare with the comic force of this moment. E. M. W.

Tillyard comments:

"When Chaucer delivers his master stroke, bringing back the carpenter into the story through Nicholas's yelling for water, he gets beyond the social bounds of comedy and impels the reader's mind to exult and expand as it does in enjoying the very greatest art." ⁶⁴

Despite general appreciation of its humour, the Miller's Tale has had an uneven critical reception. Many critics, while recognizing the tale's comic virtuosity have been troubled by its bawdiness and amoral tone. Henry Dwight Sedgewick, in Dan Chaucer suggested ignoring the tale:

The Miller's tale, in spite of Chaucer's skill as a raconteur, is, in spite of its wit, as muddy as ditch water, and very like ditch water in odiferousness. Let us take the Miller's advice and turn over leaf. ⁶⁵

⁶⁴Poetry Direct and Oblique (London: Chatto & Windus, 1945), p. 92.

⁶⁵(Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1934), p. 280. Of course, the advice: "Turne over the leef and chese another tale," (3178), is given, not by the Miller, but by Chaucer, the narrator.

Modern critics, and indeed most earlier critics, take a more reasonable approach to the tale. However, many still seem distressed by its amorality. Two critics, using a similar approach, have attempted to read the tale as a moral example of the vices of avarice, lechery and pride, and their punishment in which: "John's 'kepyng', his avarice, is foiled; carnal Nicholas is wounded in the flesh; and prideful Absolon is humiliated."⁶⁶ Such a reading of the tale is hardly adequate. Not only does it leave Alisoun's very important role in the tale completely out of account, it involves considerable distortion of the roles played by the male characters all of which combine elements of pride and lechery in their characters. Nicholas' fleshly wound comes not as a result of his lechery, in which he has been entirely successful, but as a result of his pride in attempting to humiliate Absolon. Similarly Absolon's pride is injured while he is pursuing his amorous objectives. A more restrained and much more satisfactory approach to the moral questions raised by the tale is suggested by Paul N. Siegel:

⁶⁶ Bolton, "Interpretation," p. 92. See also the similar approach of Paul A. Olson, "Poetic Justice in the Miller's Tale," Modern Language Quarterly 24 (1963): 227-36.

The action is that of the world of comedy, where not the transgressions of moral law, but the violations of good sense are punished, but this world of comedy is set against a religious backdrop which renders the action ironically trivial by the perspective it suggests.⁶⁷

The world of the churl's tale values cleverness and effectiveness over moral or social propriety. However, Chaucer's churls' tales are all placed within the framework of the Canterbury Tales which clearly sets their amoral vision against a Christian vision of a just and ordered world.

The Miller's Tale is a work of comic genius that requires no apology. It parodies the Knight's Tale and balances the Knight's courtly excesses with bawdiness that has been raised to the level of art and develops to the full the comic potential of the plot structures common to this fragment.

The Reeve's Tale

The Reeve's Tale is most clearly distinguished from the preceding tales by its addition of a second woman to the core group of characters common to the fragment, and by the quality of the action which is governed by spite and a nasty view of human nature. The tale's principal function is as a weapon of revenge, and as such it strives to humiliate Symkyn, and by analogy, Robin, the Miller of the pilgrimage, as completely as possible. However, the

⁶⁷"Comic Irony," p. 119.

Reeve's spite touches all his characters and none are left with any trace of human dignity.

Both of the women in the Reeve's Tale play significant roles in the action; in contrast, the two preceding tales each had only one woman active in its plot. The women of the Reeve's Tale, though not so fully developed as Alisoun, are somewhat more active than Emelye. Symkyn's wife and daughter both receive the sexual advances of the young clerks. In addition, Malyne reveals the location of the cake made of the clerks' grain, and the wife subdues Symkyn with a blow on his head. Though she shapes the outcome of the tale by subduing Symkyn, the wife is curiously unaware of her actions. She does not realize whom she has slept with, for when she wakes, she cries out to John: "Help, Symkyn, for the false clerkes fighte!" (4291). In striking Symkyn she "wende han hit this Aleyn" (4305). While Malyne, unlike her mother, is aware of her actions in revealing the location of the loaf, her main function in the tale is to accept Aleyn's advances, not to initiate any action on her own.

The existence of a second active woman in the Reeve's Tale permits a number of plot developments not possible in the other tales. In this tale both young men receive sexual solace, whereas in each of the preceding tales only one young man won the lady, and the other had to content himself with a physical victory over his rival.

The existence of two women also alters the nature of the rivalry between the young men. Whereas the young men of the other tales only come into conflict as a result of their common pursuit of the same lady, in this tale, John only pursues the wife as a result of his rivalry with Aleyn. John moves the cradle because he fears: "when this jape is tald another day, /I sal been halde a daf, a cokenay!" (4208). Though Aleyn has a somewhat more attractive sexual partner, his action is no more motivated by sexual desire than that of his rival. Aleyn's decision to approach Malyne is preceded by a clear expression of his feeling of disgust for the whole of Symkyn's family.

Herdestow evere slyk a sang er now?
Lo, swilk a complyn is ymel hem alle,
A wilde fyr upon thair bodyes falle!
Wha herkned evere slyk a ferly thyng?
Ye, they sal have the flour of il endyng.
(4170-74)

Clearly, Aleyn does not approach Malyne with any feelings of affection towards her. He is motivated not so much by sexual desire as by a desire for revenge. He justifies his actions by a legalistic argument:

For, John, there is a lawe that says thus,
That gif a man in a point be agreved,
That in another he sal be releved.
Oure corn is stoin, sothly, it is na nay,
And we han had an il fit al this day,
And syn I sal have neen amendement
Agayn my los, I will have esement.
(4180-86)

Later, the effect of the relative tenderness of Aleyn's

parting from Malyne (4234-48)⁶⁸ is destroyed almost immediately by his boasts about his night's adventures (4262-67). The boast itself makes clear that Aleyn's pride in his night's work derives not from any pleasure he may have had, but from his belief that he has bettered the other men of the tale:

As I have thries in this shorte nyght
Swyved the milleres doghter bolt upright,
Whil thow hast, as a coward, been agast.
(4265-67)

Aleyn not only asserts his virility, but notes the relation of his action to Symkyn, and also claims to have bettered his rival, John. The Reeve's summation of his tale (4313-21) makes clear that the fact that his wife and daughter are "swyved" (4317) is to be seen as part of Symkyn's punishment. Even the virility of the young clerks is used by the Reeve to offer one more insult to Symkyn. When the wife is in bed with John, the Reeve comments: "So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yore" (4230).

Ironically, the addition of a second woman to the core group of characters results in a decreased, rather than an increased role for the women of this tale. Within the tale women are neither ideals to be sought after, like

⁶⁸ See R. E. Kaske, "An Aube in the Reeve's Tale," ELH 26 (1959): 295-310, for a discussion of the parting of Aleyn and Malyne, as it relates to the tradition of the dawn-song or aube.

Emelye, nor fully developed, appealing characters, like Alisoun. Rather they are objects to be used by men to gain tactical advantages in relation to other men. The fact that each young man has an available source of sexual solace reduces the dramatic interest of their amorous pursuits. Accordingly, the Reeve motivates not only the sexual escapades but the whole tale by the hostility of the male characters to one another.

Even at the beginning of the action of the tale, John and Aleyn are determined to outwit Symkyn. Symkyn perceives their attempt, and devises the trick with their horse to humiliate them. The clerks in turn gain their revenge at night. Even once Symkyn is felled by a blow from his wife, the clerks continue to "beete hym weel" (4308).

Not only are the characters of the Reeve's Tale motivated by spite, but even the Reeve's desire to tell the tale is a result of his anger at the Miller. Osewold explains to the pilgrims:

This dronke Millere hath ytoold us heer.
How that bigyled was a carpenteer,
Peraventure in scorn, for I am oon.
And, by youre leve, I shal hym quite anon;
(3913-16)

If Osewold perceived only a tale of the "bigyling" of a carpenter, he has missed the greater part of the Miller's Tale, in which John's cuckolding is only one small part and in which punishments as painful are offered to other characters. The Reeve's Tale makes no attempt at such balance.

The tale singlemindedly humiliates Symkyn in every aspect of his pride: he was proud of his strength, and he is felled by a blow from his wife; he was proud of his wife and daughter, and they are "swyved" (4312); he was proud of his cunning, and he is cheated. The lengthy description of Symkyn which opens the tale makes his humiliation more complete as, point by point, his pretensions are exploded. To make sure his audience does not miss the point of his diatribe, Ossewold ends his tale with a summary of the insults and injuries which Symkyn has received, while stressing his trade in order that the connection with the Miller of the pilgrimage not be lost:

Thus is the proude millere wel ybete,
And hath ylost the gryndynge of the whete.
And payed for the soper everideel
Of Aleyn and of John, that bette hym weel.
His wyf is swyved, and his doghter als.
Lo, swich it is a millere to be fals!

(4313-18)

In contrast, the conclusion of the Miller's Tale appears almost a model of balance:

Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,
For al his kepyng and his jalousye;
And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye;
And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.

(3850-53)

In his anger, the Reeve has exacted a revenge that is out of all proportion to the insult he may have received. Similarly, Symkyn's punishment is out of proportion to his crime. Despite the attempts by both Aleyn, the clerk, and the Reeve himself (3912) to justify their excesses by

legalistic language,⁶⁹ the tale represents not the triumph of justice, but rather the triumph of ire and spite, disguised as justice. Morton W. Bloomfield's reading of the tale is clearly unacceptable:

The Reeve's Tale, although certainly not a philosophical pageant-like tale, nevertheless unlike many fabliaux, is based on justice and fair play We not only enjoy the joke and trick, but we can glow with a sense that the universe is on the side of the just.⁷⁰

Surely such a reading of the tale is only possible if one has succumbed to the Reeve's own narrow view of his material.

Even though the Reeve directs his diatribe against Symkyn, none of his other characters emerge with much dignity. The women of the tale are treated as little more than sexual objects. Before the action of the tale begins we are told that the wife is "as digne as water in a dich" (3964). The explanation of her ancestry makes clear that her pretensions and those of her husband are hollow. The town parson has clearly failed in his spiritual vocation and is little better than a scoundrel. The description of Malyne combines attractive features: "eyen greye as glas" (3974), "brestes rounde and hye" (3975), and "right fair ...

⁶⁹See Joseph L. Baird, "Law and the Reeve's Tale," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 70 (1969): 679-83, for a discussion of the distortion of legal principles in the tale.

⁷⁰"UnBoethian Interpretation," p. 206.

heer" (3976), with unattractive ones: "thikke" (3973), "kamus nose" (3974) and "buttokes brode" (3975). Even the young clerks are made to appear stupid and unsophisticated "by their use of northern forms in their speech,"⁷¹ and by their ludicrous pursuit of their horse through the fen (4090-4106). Trevor Whittack notes:

The characters are belittled and drawn with an ugliness not to be found in the previous tale ... the cumulative effect of some details and the selection of particular images is on the whole derogatory to all the characters of the tale.⁷²

In his prologue, the Reeve offers a reasonably good indication of the type of tale he is to tell. He comments upon his old age:

Foure gleedes han we, which I shal devyse, --
Avauntyng, liyng, anger, coveitise;
These foure sparkles longen unto eelde.
(3883-5)

Lechery is not among the Reeve's "foure gleedes" of old age, and accordingly, even the sexual escapades of the tale are motivated, not by lust, but by anger, or by the desire to have adventures worth boasting of. All the male characters are boastful, deceitful, wrathful, and covetous. The Reeve devotes two lines of his five line summation of

⁷¹The use of northern speech forms by the clerks was noted as early as Canterbury Tales, ed. Tyrwhitt 4: 250-51. The dialect forms used have been discussed at length by Tolkien, "Chaucer as a Philologist." For a more recent discussion see Thomas J. Garbaty, "Satire and Regionalism: The Reeve and his Tale," Chaucer Review 8 (1973-4): 1-8.

⁷²Reading, p. 98.

the tale to noting Symkyn's financial loss. He "hath ylost the gryndynge of the whete, /And payed for the soper ever-ideel" (4314-15).

In view of the "foure gleedes" (3883) which control the action, how are we to read the Reeve's Tale? Is it simply: "a grey tale for grey and depressing people,"⁷³ "The rendering of a particularly bilious view of life,"⁷⁴ or an example of: "Bitterness, frustration, ugliness? Men's motives are sordid, their pleasures nasty, and life is a cheat."⁷⁵ Surely such a reading would leave the tale no place in Chaucer's greatest work. M. Copland offers one method of integrating the tale into the Canterbury series:

if we find these attitudes personally uncongenial we are, by means of their decorous allocation to a suitable storyteller, empowered to contemplate them, or rather enter into them provisionally, with gleeful confidence in their authenticity as a brand of attitude.⁷⁶

In view of our discussion of the first fragment it may be possible to expand Copland's suggestion by pointing out that that tale reflects not only a brand of attitude but

⁷³M. Copland, "The Reeve's Tale: Harlotrie or Sermonizing," Medium Aevum 31 (1962): 30.

⁷⁴Muscatine, French Tradition, p. 204.

⁷⁵Whittock, Reading, p. 97.

⁷⁶Copland, "Harlotrie," p. 30.

also one of the possible developments of the materials common to the fragment.

No reading of the tale can be complete if it does not fully recognize its humour. Perhaps Frank is correct in suggesting that critics have paid too much attention to the darker side of Osewold's nature: "Too much has been made of his envy and bitterness. True, he is not admirable, but he is comic."⁷⁷ Both tale and teller are Chaucer's comic creations. The humour is of a different sort from that of the Miller's Tale, but the tale remains essentially comic and not simply a treatise on the vice of anger. In developing in a brilliantly comic form the fictional possibilities of a particular vision of the world, the Reeve's Tale is an admirable work of art, even though the world it depicts may not be admirable.

The Cook's Tale

Clearly any discussion of the Cook's Tale must largely be conjectured. However, our discussion of the patterns common to the fragment may make some sort of discussion of the tale possible. When the tale breaks off, it has introduced four characters: an older man, the Victualler; two younger men, Perkyn and his comrade; and a young woman, the

⁷⁷"Comedy of Limitation," p. 55. Glending Olson, in "The Reeve's Tale as a Fabliau," Modern Language Quarterly 35 (1974), pp. 219-30 also argues that the comic features of the tale need fuller study.

comrade's wife. Since its characters correspond to the core group of characters common to the other tales, there is at least a strong suggestion that the tale itself would follow the other patterns common to the fragment. Certainly, for example, some sort of sexual involvement is inevitable between Perkyn, who is "ful of love and paramour" (4372), and the wife who "swyved for hir sustenance" (4422). While it seems that it would generally follow the patterns established in the other tales of the fragment, the Cook's Tale can be distinguished from them on a number of grounds. It promises to be the nastiest tale of the fragment. Its characters, with the exception of the Victualler, are chosen from lower levels of society than those of any other tale, and their actions would presumably be consistent with their place in London's criminal low-life. This tale would probably follow the other churls' tales in centering on a trick, or a series of tricks, but the tricks may be cruder. In his prologue the Cook has expressed his appreciation of the nastier aspects of the Reeve's Tale while ignoring the Reeve's claims for justice in his tale. Presumably, then, the Cook's Tale would offer violence not tempered with even the pretence of justice. When the Reeve's Tale is finished:

The Cook of Londoun, whil the Reve spak,
For joye him thoughte he clawed him on the bak.
"Ha! ha!" quod he, "for Cristes passion,
This millere hadde a sharp conclusion
Upon his argument of herbergeage!

.....

I pray to God, so yeve me sorwe and care
If evere, sitthe I highte Hogge of Ware,
Herd I a millere bettre yset a-werk.
He hadde a jape of malice in the derk.
But God forbede that we stynte heere;
And therefore, if ye vouche-sauf to heere
A tale of me, that am a povre man,
I wol yow telle, as wel as evere I kan,
A litel jape that fil in oure citee.

(4325-43)

Roger's appreciation of Symkyn's "conclusion" is clear.

Though he comments at some length on the "argument of herbergage" (4329), a relatively small part of the tale, and delights in its violence, he ignores the Reeve's moralization. In offering to tell his "litel jape" (4343) Roger's only purpose is to continue the series of tales (4339) which he has been enjoying. Clearly his continuation is to be another "jape of malice in the derk" (4338), presumably violence for its own sake without even an attempt at moralization. The apparent amorality of his tale may reflect the Cook's unusual position amongst the group travelling to Canterbury. Unlike even such churls as the Miller and Reeve, he joins the group, not as an independent pilgrim, but as the servant of others. He is not travelling to Canterbury for some religious or quasi-religious purpose; rather he is employed by the guildsmen, and is accompanying them on their journey. Not only is the Cook, as the guildsmen's servant, at the bottom of the social hierarchy of the pilgrimage, but also, as a pilgrim only by virtue of his employment, he may be, in some sense, outside its moral hierarchy.

] Another indication of the direction this tale might

take is Roger's extended commentary on the "argument of herbergage" (4329) and the perils of "herberwyng by nyghte" (4332, also 4330-34), which suggest that his tale may deal with some such question.⁷⁸ When the tale breaks off,

Perkyn has just moved his "herbergage" from his master's house to that of his friend. Whatever ensues between Perkyn and the wife would be a result of "herberwyng."

The role that Perkyn's (master, the Victualler,⁷⁹ is to play in the tale is not clearly defined. As the fragment ends, Perkyn has sent "his bed and his array" (4418) to his comrade's house and the focus of the tale appears to shift away from the master's house. Perhaps Perkyn could play one last trick on his master before taking his leave, or else the Victualler might re-enter the tale at some later point, possibly through dealings with the wife, which could concern either her "shoppe" (4422), or her other business. However, it seems unlikely that the Victualler would simply disappear from the tale. The Victualler would seem to be a

⁷⁸ See Earl D. Lyon, "The Cook's Tale," in Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, eds. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), pp. 148-54, for a good general discussion of the tale and its possible development, including this point.

⁷⁹ The term "victualler" could be applied to the members of a number of guilds who dealt in foodstuffs. However, the Victualler of this tale could only belong to one or two of these. My whole discussion of the Victualler depends on George Unwin, The Gilds and Companies of London (London: Methuen & Co., 1908), and Ernest P. Kuhl, "Chaucer's Burgesses," Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters 18 (1916): 652-75, for background on London

professional rival to the Cook, and all of the other Canterbury Tales told about professional rivals, those of the Miller, Reeve, Friar, Summoner, and possibly that of the Shipman, end in the humiliation of the character whose calling is offensive to the tale's narrator. The

Victualler is apparently a wealthy man with a considerable number of servants (see 4403-10). The description of his shop makes no reference to any type of food processing such as brewing or baking, but refers rather to "chaffare" (4389), meaning "trafficking, trading, merchandise, wares."⁸⁰ The Victualler appears to be a businessman dealing in food-stuffs, possibly a fishmonger, but more likely a grocer.

The Cook would have to deal with such a victualler in purchasing his foodstuffs and some sort of antagonism between them could be expected. If the Cook intends to tell a tale at the expense of a victualler, he is not simply giving vent to a personal grudge, he is taking sides in a violent political struggle that engulfed London, the tale's setting, in the latter part of the fourteenth century.

Victualling and non-victualling trades fought for control of London's civic government with the two parties alternately gaining ascendancy. Between 1383 and 1388, a period during which Chaucer was presumably formulating plans for, and

⁸⁰ From the glossary of Works, ed. Robinson, p. 938.

beginning to write the Canterbury Tales.⁸¹ the victualling trades, led by Nicholas Brembre, a grocer, controlled London. Subsequently, Brembre was impeached and hanged, and the non-victualling trades gained permanent ascendancy. Public feeling on the whole issue was sufficiently strong that even the mere mention of Brembre's name was forbidden by law as late as six years after his death.⁸² A tale about a victualler would be politically contentious, and a tale that included the humiliation of a victualler by Perkyn's ilk would represent the anarchical triumph of low-lifers over a member of a powerful class in Chaucer's society. A tale on such a contentious political issue is extremely unusual in Chaucer, especially in view of Ernest P. Kuhl's suggestion that, in selecting the five guildsmen described in the General Prologue, Chaucer deliberately avoided the leading trades of both parties in London's civic strife, thereby avoiding taking sides in the issue.⁸³

The role of Perkyn in a complete Cook's Tale would have to be very important. The whole opening section of the tale is focused on him and his activities, and he is

⁸¹In his introduction to Works, Robinson suggests that Chaucer began work on the Canterbury Tales in 1387 or thereabouts (p. xxix).

⁸²See Unwin, Gilds of London, p. 154.

⁸³The article, "Chaucer's Burgesses" is devoted to establishing this point.

described at considerable length, whereas the other characters are introduced very briefly. He is almost an ideal hero for a churl's tale: he is attractive (4368-9), lecherous (4372-5), a "riotous" (4408) lover of "disport" (4382), and entirely without scruples. Whatever direction the later action took, it should certainly center on Perkyn.

The possible role of Perkyn's comrade in the tale is unclear. He could be a wronged host who discovers that "herberwyng by nyghte is perilous" (4332). Alternatively he could join Perkyn in playing some trick on the Victualler. The comrade's wife would clearly play some role in whatever trick formed the center of the tale. Her profession, prostitution, has several implications for the possible direction of the tale. It establishes the sordid, low-life subject matter to be dealt with. The Cook's Tale, unlike the tales of the Knight and Miller, cannot focus much attention on the winning of the lady, for this lady will be too easily won; the main concern of the tale must be the tricks that the men of the tale will play on one another, possibly with the wife's assistance. It seems unlikely that other characters would enter the tale, except in incidental roles. Whereas even the Reeve felt obliged by propriety to have two women to provide sexual solace for his two young clerks, there is nothing to stop Perkyn's comrade's wife from providing solace for everyone.

We have been able to discuss certain general concerns

and plot possibilities in the Cook's Tale. In the absence of any clear analogue in contemporary literature more specific discussion of possible plot details would be mere speculation. It may be more useful to inquire as to why Chaucer left the tale fragmentary. Charles A. Owen Jr.⁸⁴ suggests that Chaucer was working on the tale at the time of his death. While it is not my intention to discuss the chronology of the Canterbury Tales at any length, I would suggest that other parts of the work, such as the Marriage Group, show a fuller exploitation of the possibilities of the pilgrimage as a literary frame than does the first fragment, and presumably must have been composed after it.⁸⁵ It is perhaps possible that Chaucer abandoned the tale because he felt a tale of a Victualler was too politically sensitive. Raymond Preston feels that Chaucer had simply tired of the fabliaux: "Chaucer goes as far as the door of the brothel, and then turns. He has had enough, for the time being, of low life."⁸⁶ It may be possible to suggest that Chaucer did not so much grow tired of low-life, but rather

⁸⁴"The Development of the Canterbury Tales," Journal of English and Germanic Philology 57 (1958): 457.

⁸⁵Robinson, in a general note on the Miller's Tale, in Works, p. 683, suggests that the tales of the Miller, Reeve, and Cook were composed together in "the last decade of Chaucer's life," but that "there are also reasons for not putting them at the end of Chaucer's activity. They seem to precede the so-called Marriage Group."

⁸⁶Chaucer (London: Sheed & Ward, 1952), p. 197.

that low-life had completed its purpose in the fragment. The fragment may be, in a curious way, complete. Chaucer has traced the breakdown of the noble order exemplified by Theseus into the narrow malice of Ossewold, the Reeve, then suggested the anarchy that lay beyond in the Cook's depiction of the London underworld. Chaucer goes as far as the brothel door, but he need go no further, the implications of such a tale are clear. The Cook's Tale, in spite of its fragmentary nature, may serve to complete the artistic design of the first fragment.

CHAPTER IV

THE ORDER OF THE FIRST FRAGMENT

To this point we have discussed the patterns of similarity among the tales of the first fragment and the process of differentiation of each tale within it. These patterns of similarity and distinction clearly establish that the tales of the fragment form a tightly unified group; however, they do not illuminate one important aspect of the artistic shape of the fragment, the order in which the tales appear. The tales do present variations on materials stated by the Knight; however, these variations are not simply random explorations of the potential of particular plot elements, rather the tales form a clearly ordered sequence, having a particular shape and direction.

The basic ordering element among the tales of the first fragment is a pattern of descent. All elements of the tales are affected as the fragment moves from courtly romance, through civic comedy and rustic farce, to break off at the entrance to the brothel. Language, characterization and plot action are all involved in the pattern of descent.

In a good recent study of "The Three Styles of Fragment I of the Canterbury Tales," John N. Fisher links

the three complete tales to "courtly, civic and rustic styles."⁸⁷ His discussion of style includes some discussion of the language of each tale, and also brief examinations of characterization and plot action. His chief interest is not so much discussing the tales themselves, but rather linking the patterns of style in the fragment to the discussion of three levels of style set forth in John of Garland's Poetria (ca. 1250). Fisher writes:

It appears that the Knight's, Miller's and Reeve's Tales in Fragment I of the Canterbury Tales could almost have been designed to illustrate distinction set forth by John of Garland.

in moving from symmetry, decorative detail, slow pace, and philosophical coloring in the Knight's Tale, to gallic "tromperie", biblical and courtly echoes, and scatological humour in the Miller's Tale, to courtly talk and sexual hilarity in the Reeve's Tale, we find stylistic gradation in both material and language corresponding to John of Garland's social interpretations of style.⁸⁸

The greatest weakness of Fisher's discussion is that in concentrating on John of Garland's division of style into three levels, he ignores the fourth tale of the fragment. The Cook's Tale breaks off after introducing four characters, but it is clearly intended to form the fourth part of a pattern of stylistic lowering through the fragment. The

⁸⁷ Chaucer Review 8 (1973-4): 126. Muscatine, in French Tradition, classifies these three tales into high, middle and low styles, but never explicitly discusses the patterns of style within the fragment.

⁸⁸ Fisher, "Three Styles," pp. 121, 123.

fragment began with a tale concerned with knights and a lady, followed by one concerned with Oxford clerks, a wealthy citizen and his attractive wife and then one concerned with a poor miller, the illegitimate daughter of a parson who is his wife, their daughter, and two students who are presented as unsophisticated country fools. The Cook's Tale presents characters who are drawn from London's underworld: the woman is a prostitute; Perkyn, a thief; and his friend, a scoundrel. The action of the tale would be in keeping with the nature of its characters, and would certainly form the low point in the pattern of descent from the Knight's Tale.

The pattern of descent affects nearly all aspects of the tale. The prayers before the action descend from formal prayers in temples, through Nicholas' "Pater-noster, clom" (3638) to the "complyn" (4171) of the snoring of Symkyn's family. The battle in each tale varies from a formal tournament, through a battle of wits, to Symkyn and Aleyn who "walwe as doon two pigges in a poke" (4278). The pattern is also clear in the treatment of sex in the tales. The Knight's Tale does not concern itself with sex; the Miller's Tale, though bawdy, avoids discussion of the act itself, and instead comments euphemistically: "Ther was the revel and the melodye" (3652). The Reeve's Tale handles the question more crudely: "He priketh harde and depe as he were mad" (4231).

Edmund Reiss traces the changing nature of love through all of the first fragment:

The Knight's Tale presented love as a noble sentiment -- misdirected and destructive, but still ostensibly noble; the Miller's Tale shows it as a passion, as unadulterated adultery -- perhaps what the noble love of the Knight's Tale in fact is. There is a progression of sorts here, for the first group of tales in the Canterbury Tales presents a constant and distinct lowering or reduction of love. In the Reeve's Tale, love is seen as the result not of passion but of revenge.

In the Reeve's Tale love had been expressed in terms of revenge, but revenge was still a human feeling. In the Cook's Tale love is depersonalized; it becomes something to barter with, the equivalent of money.⁸⁹

The pattern of descent through the fragment is accompanied by a gradual narrowing of the scope of the tales. Whereas the action of the Knight's Tale is spread over many years, the action of the Miller's Tale, including the seduction of Alisoun, takes a few weeks or months, and that of the Reeve's Tale one day and night. The settings of the tales moves from the splendour of Athens, through John's comfortable home to Symkyn's single room. Even the tales themselves become progressively shorter. The Knight's Tale is two thousand two hundred and fifty lines long, the Miller's six hundred and sixty-eight and the Reeve's four hundred and four. The Cook's Tale breaks off after introducing four characters in fifty-eight lines, whereas the tales of the Knight, Miller, and Reeve took one hundred and fifty-three.

⁸⁹Reiss, "Parodies of Love," pp. 41-43.

one hundred and twenty-six, and eighty-two respectively to introduce their four main characters, so that the pattern of increasing condensation of narrative material apparently continues into the Cook's Tale.

The tales of the first fragment move from an idealistic depiction of noble life through a courtly romance in the Knight's Tale, to joyous bawdy comedy in the Miller's, and to "a narrow and rather ugly view of things"⁹⁰ in the Reeve's. The Cook's Tale promises to be another "jape of malice in the derk" (4338), but with characters drawn from the London underworld, this tale's action would be still cruder than that of the Reeve's Tale. Chaucer has clearly established a pattern of descent through the tales of the first fragment. The descent to anarchy in the Cook's Tale represents in some sense the incompleteness of all the tales of the fragment though at the same time it may represent the completion of the artistic design of the fragment as a whole. Theseus may have tried to assert the dominance of order but forces of chaos ultimately rule. The different perfections of the Knight's and Miller's tales are not able to control the fragment, either singly or in combination. Neither the Knight's faith in order, nor the Miller's exaltation of human cleverness and joyous sexuality can counteract the descent into the Cook's anarchy. On an

⁹⁰R. W. Harvey, "The Reeve's Polemic," Wascana Review 2 (1967): 65.

artistic level, however, Chaucer may be using the chaos of the Cook's incomplete tale to complete the artistic design of the first fragment. It may be possible to see the fragment as, in some sense, an ordered artistic whole, even though its final tale is incomplete.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that the first fragment of the Canterbury Tales does not contain simply a collection of disparate tales. Rather, it is, itself, a carefully structured, tightly unified, and essentially complete work of art. Chaucer shaped the fragment by superimposing a pattern of descent through the tales on a complex pattern of similarity and interrelation among them. The Knight's Tale provides an idealistic vision of a philosophically ordered world, but the subsequent tales use elements drawn from it to distort that vision until the fragment ends at the door of the brothel. The Knight's idealism, the Miller's joyful bawdry, and the Reeve's vindictiveness all become part of the descent into anarchy. In tracing the pattern of descent in the fragment, Chaucer may wish to suggest that no secular vision, no matter how noble, can provide a permanent alternative to anarchy. To find a satisfactory solution to the problems raised by the fragment it may be necessary to look beyond the fragment itself to the end of the Canterbury pilgrimage, with the Parson's Tale preparing the pilgrims for the shrine of Saint Thomas. As the beginning of that pilgrimage, the first fragment may be pointing out the ultimate inadequacy of all secular visions, and suggesting the need for a more adequate solution to be found in the solace of Christian doctrine.

APPENDIX

Nicholas' Astrology

The use of the system of planetary hours in the Knight's Tale has been well documented. However, the use of this system in Nicholas' prediction of the flood has not been noted. The system is outlined in Chaucer's A Treatise on the Astrolabe.⁹¹ Each day is divided into twenty-four "houres inequales" (II, 10, 1). These are determined by dividing the time between sunrise and sunset into twelve equal parts, and dividing the time between sunset and sunrise into twelve equal parts. Except at spring and fall equinoxes the hours of the day and the hours of the night would be of different lengths, hence the name "houres inequales" (II, 10, 1), as opposed to the "houres equales, that is to seyn the houres of the klokke" (II, 11, 1-2). Chaucer points out: "these houres inequales ben clepid houres of planetes" (II, 10, 1-2). Each of the days of the week are assigned to different planets as follows: Sunday, Sun; Monday, Moon; Tuesday, Mars; Wednesday, Mercury;

⁹¹Works, ed. Robinson, pp. 544-63. My discussion is based on Part II, sections 10 and 12, pp. 552-53. Citations from the Astrolabe in this appendix will be identified by part, section, and line numbers. Citations from the first fragment will continue to be identified by line numbers only.

Thursday, Jupiter; Friday, Venus; Saturday, Saturn. Each day is considered as beginning at dawn and continuing until the following dawn. The first inequal hour of each day is assigned to the planet of that day, and the succeeding hours are assigned to the various planets according to the following rotation: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon, and back to Saturn to begin again. According to this system, then, not only the first hour of each day "(approximately 6:00-7:00 A. M. in clock-time) is assigned to the planet of that day," but also the eighth (approximately 1:00-2:00 P. M.), the fifteenth (approximately 8:00-9:00 P. M.), and the twenty-second (approximately 3:00-4:00 A. M.).

Using this brief outline of the system of planetary hours, it is possible to examine the astrological base of Nicholas' prediction. The rain is to begin "a Monday next, at quarter nyght" (3516) and to cover the earth "in lasse than an hour" (3519). In his glossary Robinson points out that "quarter nyght" means a time "when a quarter of the night is gone,"⁹² approximately 9:00 P. M., but more precisely, the beginning of the sixteenth inequal hour, the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth hours having constituted three twelfths, or one quarter of the night. The hour during which the flood is supposed to drown the whole world is to be the sixteenth planetary hour of Monday. The

⁹²Works, p. 971.

fifteenth hour would be ruled by the moon, the planet to which Monday was assigned. Next in rotation would be Saturn, the most destructive of the planets, who, in the Knight's Tale, claimed to govern "the drenchyng in the see" (2456).

Nicholas instructs John to provide "vitaille suffisant /But for a day" (3551-2), that is, for Tuesday which they apparently expect to spend floating about in their tubs. He then predicts: "The water shal aslake and goon away /Aboute pryme upon the nexte day" (3553-54). Robinson notes that "pryme" would refer to 9:00 A. M.,⁹³ that is, the beginning of the fourth planetary hour. Wednesday would begin with the hour of Mercury, followed by that of the moon, and Saturn, and the fourth hour would be governed by Jupiter, the planet with the greatest beneficial influence, whose grace Theseus praises in his final speech.

Though Nicholas' prediction carefully follows the system of planetary hours, the actual events of the tale make a mockery of it. Shortly after nightfall (3633-36) on Monday, during the thirteenth planetary hour, which begins at sunset, Nicholas, John, and Alisoun climb into their separate tubs, which Nicholas previously instructed were to be set far enough apart that there "be no synne, /Nameore

⁹³Ibid., p. 686, note to line 3554.

in lookyng than ther shal in deede" (3590-91). Ironically, this hour is ruled by Venus, goddess of love, who is the fifth in rotation following the moon, which, as the planet of the day, ruled the eighth hour. Even more ironically, the moon, or Diana, the goddess of chastity rules the hour when Nicholas and Alisoun descend from their tube and hurry off to "the revel and the melodye" (3652) in the carpenter's bed. John falls asleep "Aboute corfew-tyme, or litel moore" (3645), and begins to snore, and Nicholas and Alisoun start down their ladders without delay. Robinson notes that "corfew-tyme" would be "probably 8 P. M."⁹⁴ Action beginning shortly after 8:00 P. M. would fall within the fifteenth planetary hour, and be ruled by the planet of the day, in this case, the moon.

⁹⁴Ibid., note to line 3645.

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